



ECU's Athena SWAN Charter
Guide to processes
May 2015



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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide outlines the processes supporting ECU's Athena SWAN Charter awards. It encompasses information of the role of those involved in the Athena SWAN peer review assessment process and the expectations and responsibilities placed on them. The guide also covers application, review and appeal procedures.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

ECU's Athena SWAN Charter awards handbook

The handbook includes detailed information on how to submit an application and a question-by-question run-through of the application form, including information on what evidence to include.

Frequently asked questions

Check our **FAQs** to see if your query has been answered

Contact ECU's equality charter team

athenaswan@ecu.ac.uk

1. APPLICATION FOR SUBMISSIONS PROCESS

1.1 NOTIFICATION OF INTENTION TO APPLY FOR AN AWARD

See Guidance on submitting applications in ECU's Athena SWAN Charter awards handbook for full details

There are two submission dates per year. These are the last working day of April and November.

An institution or department should notify ECU of their intention to make an award application two calendar months in advance of the submission deadline.

The notification is not binding, and there is no penalty for not submitting. However, ECU reserves the right to not accept an application where no intention to submit has been received.

Notification should be sent to athenaswan@ecu.ac.uk.

1.2 SUBMITTING YOUR APPLICATION

Applicants must submit their application by the relevant deadline and in accordance with the administrative criteria set out in the awards handbook.

An extension of up to one week may be granted in exceptional circumstances. The decision to grant an extension is at ECU's discretion. If the request for an extension is refused, ECU will provide reasons.

ECU will acknowledge each application. If acknowledgment is not received within five working days of the submission deadline, the applicant should contact ECU by phone.

The application is checked by ECU for compliance with the administrative criteria set out in the awards handbook. If the application is incomplete or does not comply with the criteria set out in the awards handbook, ECU reserves the right to reject the application.

If the application is rejected, ECU will provide reasons. The submission fee will be refunded.

The applicant will be able to re-submit at the next deadline, but must notify ECU of their intention to re-submit (see 1.1).

1.3 OBJECTION TO ASSESSING AWARD APPLICATIONS

Applicants are required to confirm in their letter of endorsement that the information presented in an application (including qualitative and quantitative data) is an honest, accurate and true representation of the institution or department.

ECU reserves the right not to assess an award in the following circumstances:

- = information comes to light that the application contains false or misleading information or statements which are material to the applicant's eligibility for the award
- = subsequent to receipt of an application, information comes to light establishing that the applicant no longer satisfies the requirements of the award

In both of the above circumstances, the information identified or received must be independently verifiable or be received from a credible source. For example, from a professional association, through nationally verified data (eg the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)), or a finding by competent authority (such as a court or tribunal or the Equalities and Human Rights Commission).

ECU will not consider information from anonymous sources or which require further investigation.

Where any of the above circumstances are brought to ECU's attention, ECU's equality charters manager will review the impact of the information on the institution's eligibility for an award.

If ECU considers that the information is relevant and likely to impact on the panel's award recommendation, they will send a formal written notice to the institution which will:

- = provide notice that ECU has received information that we consider important for the fair assessment of an award and that the application may not be submitted to a panel for review
- = provide all supporting information which has been considered by ECU
- = state that the institution may make written representations on the information

The institution will be given a period of ten working days from the date of the notice to submit representations on the proposed information. Any representations should be made in writing to ECU and clearly set out the grounds on which the institution objects to the proposed decision not to assess the application.

If representations are received within the ten working day period, ECU's equality charters manager will consider the representations. A final decision will be made within ten working days of receipt of the applicant's representations.

If the decision is to proceed with assessing the application, ECU will further decide whether to:

- = submit only the original application to the award panel
- = share all information and representations received by ECU with the award panel along with the application

ECU will inform the institution of the decisions in writing, providing the reasons for their decision.

ECU's decision is final.

2. PEER REVIEW PROCESSES

ECU Athena SWAN Charter award applications are assessed by peer review panels. The panel recommends decisions on awards to ECU.

2.1 PANEL COMPOSITION

ECU will convene the meeting of an awards panel to review applications. The panel will decide whether to recommend to ECU that an award is conferred.

Awards panels will be made up of five people, and review up to six applications per sitting.

The quorum for the panel is four members drawn from at least two of the three groups set out below.

Panellists are selected from a pool of people who have applied to ECU to become a panellist, or who are invited by ECU to be a panellist when their involvement in a panel will help achieve a panel balance.

In constructing the panel ECU will seek to have representation of men and women, and have experienced and new panellists. Where possible, we group applications by subject area, for example chemistry or law, and draw panellists from the following groups of people:

- = academics
- = human resources or equality and diversity practitioners with experience of higher education
- = subject specialists (for example industry and research institute representatives, members or employees of learned and professional societies, gender equality specialists)

The panel is run by a chair appointed by ECU. The chair will have experience of participating in previous panels and will have normally undertaken ECU's panellist chair training. The chair will be a voting panellist.

ECU staff moderate the panels and provide the secretariat. These are non-voting roles.

There may be panel observers present during the award panel meeting. Observers do not take part in the decision-making process and do not vote.

2.1.1 CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

Panellists are automatically precluded from assessing applications from the institution where they are currently employed.

Other conflicts of interest can include:

- = previous employment or study at a department or institution within the last ten years
- = paid consultancy at a department or institution within the last five years

- = close personal relationships with individuals at a department or institution

All panellists will submit a declaration of interest form with their application to join ECU's pool of panellists and/or in advance of taking part in a panel. All panellists will be asked to review this information annually and in advance of a panel.

If a conflict of interest becomes apparent, ECU's equality charters manager will decide if it prevents the panellist sitting on a panel where the conflict could manifest.

The ECU moderator and secretary will also declare interests. If a conflict of interest is declared, ECU's equality charters manager will decide if this prevents them from participating in certain panels.

ECU will hold declarations securely. Should an individual inform ECU that they no longer wish to be considered as a panellist, their declaration of interest information will be destroyed one year after notification of withdrawal.

2.1.2 OBJECTIONS TO PANEL COMPOSITION

Applicants (who have indicated that they will be submitting an application) will not be able to select panellists but can raise objections to particular panellists taking part in the review of their application.

ECU will provide applicants with a list of all the panellists that will be reviewing applications in any given round. This information will be provided one month before the submission deadline.

Any objections should be made in writing to ECU, with reasons to support the objection, within five working days from the date of sending the list of potential panellists.

If the applicant does not raise an objection within five working days, ECU will take this as agreement to any panel combination from the list of potential panellists.

ECU's equality charters manager will consider any objections to a potential panellist. They will decide whether the potential panellist can participate in the relevant panel. ECU will inform the applicant of the decision in writing.

ECU's decision is final.

2.2 AWARDS PANEL PROCESS

Panellists will receive a copy of the application to review prior to the panel. Where applicable, they will also receive feedback from the applicant's most recent application.

Panellists are required to:

- = review the application in accordance with guidance set out for applicants in the awards handbook
- = assess the application independently and complete review sheets before the panel meeting

- = collectively review the application at the award panel meeting
 - = only take into account information included in the application (or any other information that ECU deems relevant, see 1.3 for more details)
- The chair is appointed by ECU. In addition to their role as panellist, the chair is required to:
- = give structure to the deliberations and move the discussion towards a decision
 - = ensure any panellist comments that are deemed prejudicial, such as personal opinions unrelated to the application, are disregarded. If necessary they can ask a panellist to leave the panel
 - = summarise the panel's discussion
 - = keep discussions on schedule

The chair and other panellists must not communicate about the awards panel or the applications for review outside of the panel unless facilitated by ECU.

ECU will appoint a moderator (an experienced member of ECU staff) and a secretary (a member of ECU staff, different to the moderator).

An experienced member of ECU staff will take the role of moderator. The moderator is required to:

- = provide assistance and guidance on the application and assessment process
- = ensure the panel comply with the requirements set out in this document
- = ensure consistency of panel assessment and decisions. If required, the moderator may provide a view on whether the application meets the requirements of the award level applied for
- = ensure any panellist comments that are deemed prejudicial, such as personal opinions unrelated to the application, are disregarded
- = ensure feedback from panel decisions is detailed and coherent
- = moderate any subsequent discussion in the event that a panel requests further information or amendments (see 2.3.1)

A member of ECU staff will take the role of secretary. The secretary is required to:

- = record the key discussion points of the award panel
- = request that the panel identify feedback to be provided to the applicant
- = coordinate any subsequent discussion in the event that a panel requests further information or amendments

Neither the secretary nor the moderator vote in the recommendation on awards.

2.3 AWARDS PANEL RECOMMENDATION

The panel may recommend to ECU that they:

- = confer or renew the award at the level sought
- = confer or renew the award at a lower level
- = confer or renew the award at a higher level
- = do not confer an award

The panel will seek to reach a unanimous decision, but may decide on the basis of a majority. If it is a split panel (where the panel numbers are even) the chair has an additional deciding vote.

Panellists may not abstain from voting.

The panel must base its decision solely on the material placed before it against the criteria set out in the awards handbook.

2.3.1 ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

If a panel is not able to reach a decision based on the information in the application, in exceptional circumstances the panel may seek additional information from the applicant.

When additional information is sought the decision on that particular application will be adjourned. The panel secretary will send the request for additional information in writing (by email as appropriate) to the applicant.

Individual members of the panel must not contact the applicant.

Additional information requested from the applicant must be provided to ECU within ten working days of the request.

If the additional information is not received within ten working days, the panel will reach a decision based on the original available information.

Where additional information is provided it will be distributed by ECU to the panellists. The secretary will arrange to reconvene the awards panel, which may take place using a remote meeting facility.

A reconvened award panel must be quorate (see 2.1) and may only include those panellists attending the initial award panel meeting.

2.3.2 MODERATION

In exceptional circumstances, the moderator may refer an application to ECU's equality charters manager if the moderator believes that the panel's decision:

- = does not correspond with the criteria set out in the handbook
- = is not consistent with other decisions made by panels in the current assessment round

= is not based solely on the material within the application or any further information provided

ECU's equality charters manager will review the application and assessment and decide whether to refer the application to a new panel for consideration (the usual awards panel process will apply). This decision will be taken within five working days of the original panel.

If an application is referred to a new awards panel, the original panellists will be informed in writing of this decision and provided with reasons for the review.

The applicant will not be informed that their application is being assessed by a second panel unless the additional review will result in them receiving a decision on their application later than other award applicants in that round (see 2.4).

2.3.3 PANEL RECORDS

At the conclusion of the awards panel process, all application and assessment materials relating to the application will be collected by the secretary. One set of the application and all review sheets will be held securely by ECU for one year after the announcement of the award decision and then destroyed.

Once the final recommendation on the decision to confer an award has been made, panellists must delete or destroy any material relating to the applications which has not already been returned to ECU.

2.4 NOTIFICATION OF AWARD DECISION

Once all applications in a given applications round have been assessed ECU will communicate award decisions to applicants in writing.

ECU will endeavour to make and communicate award decisions within six calendar months of the closing date for a given submissions round. However, this period may be longer depending on the number of applications received, the number of panels convened, and whether further information has been requested from any applicants. See the awards handbook for further information on timelines.

2.5 PROVIDING FEEDBACK

ECU will provide feedback to applicants based on the award panel discussion. This will include the rationale behind the decision.

ECU will endeavour to provide feedback to unsuccessful applicants at the time award outcomes are communicated.

ECU will endeavour to provide feedback to applicants whose application receives an award at a lower level within one month of communicating the award outcomes.

ECU will endeavour to provide feedback to applicants whose application is successful within two months of communicating the award outcomes.

3. APPEAL PROCESS

The applicant has ten working days from the date that the award decision was communicated in which to appeal. It is the applicant's responsibility to ensure that post/email is monitored.

An appeal must be sent in writing to ECU's equality charters manager. It must clearly set out in detail the grounds upon which the appeal is made.

3.1 GROUNDS FOR APPEAL

The only accepted grounds of appeal are:

= procedural unfairness

ie: substantial failure to comply with the requirements of this procedure which leads to the process being unfair, for example there is apparent bias

= the decision was manifestly unreasonable

ie: taking into account irrelevant factors or failing to take account of relevant ones, for example if the panel rejects an application on the basis that it was submitted landscape instead of portrait even though it does not state that the application must be portrait

An appeal will not be considered outside of these grounds. Disagreement with the panel's decision is not a ground for appeal.

An appeal will be considered by ECU's equality charters manager to determine whether it has been effectively lodged within the stipulated time limit and meets the permitted grounds.

ECU will notify the applicant in writing within ten working days whether the appeal has been accepted for review by an appeals panel.

3.2 APPEALS REVIEW PANEL

Any successful appeal will result in the original application being submitted for review by a differently constituted panel.

The panel will be convened and run as per the processes set out in 2.2, except that:

= the new panel may be convened outside of the normal submissions round

= the applicant will not have the opportunity to object to particular panellists sitting on the review panel

= the review panel will be informed that the application was considered previously and the decision has been appealed, but will not be informed of the previous result or reason for appeal

= the decision of the review panel will be communicated to the applicant within ten working days of the panel considering the application

If the review panel reach a decision that is at variance with the original awards panel, ECU will communicate this in writing to the original panel members. This will include the reasons for the decision.

4. WITHDRAWAL OF AWARD

Applicants are required to confirm in their letter of endorsement that the information presented in an application (including qualitative and quantitative data) is an honest, accurate and true representation of the institution or department.

ECU reserves the right to withdraw an award in the following circumstances:

- = information comes to light that the application contains false or misleading information or statements which are material to the applicant's eligibility for the award
- = subsequent to an award being made, information comes to light establishing that the applicant no longer satisfies the requirements of the award

In both of the above circumstances, the information identified or received must be independently verifiable or be received from a credible source. For example, from a professional association, through nationally verified data (eg HESA data), or a finding by competent authority (such as a court or tribunal or the Equalities and Human Rights Commission).

ECU will not consider information from anonymous sources or which require further investigation.

Where any of the above circumstances are brought to ECU's attention, ECU will review the impact of the information on the award holder's eligibility for the award. ECU's equality charters manager will undertake a review process.

In cases where ECU considers that the information does not impact on the award holder's eligibility for the award no further action will be taken.

If ECU considers that the information is likely to render the award holder no longer eligible for the award, we will send a formal written communication that will:

- = provide notice that ECU has received information that we consider could render the award holder no longer eligible for the award, and that it may be withdrawn
- = provide all supporting information which has been considered by ECU
- = summarise the grounds for the proposed withdrawal
- = invite the award holder to make written representations on the proposed withdrawal

The award holder will be given a period of ten working days from the date of the notice to submit representations on the proposed withdrawal. Any representations should be made in writing to ECU and clearly set out the grounds on which the award holder objects to the proposed withdrawal.

If ECU does not receive any representations from the award holder within the ten working day period, ECU will issue a formal written decision to withdraw the award.

4.1 WITHDRAWAL APPEAL PANEL

If representations are received within the ten day period, the original application will be submitted to a new panel for consideration.

The panel will be convened and run as per the processes set out in 2.2, except that:

- = the panel may be convened outside of the normal applications round
- = the award holder will not have the opportunity to object to particular panellists being on the review panel
- = the review panel will be informed that the application was previously successful but that ECU has received information that we consider could render the award holder no longer eligible for the award, and that it may be withdrawn
- = the original application, all information and representations received by ECU, and the grounds for the proposed withdrawal of the award will be submitted to the panel
- = the decision of the review panel will be communicated to the applicant within ten working days of the review panel considering the application
- = ECU will issue a written decision to the award holder providing the reasons for maintaining or withdrawing the award

ECU's decision is final.

5. DEFINITIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

An institution

Refers to a university or university college of higher education (collectively known as higher education institutions (HEIs)) and research institutes.

A department

A unit within an institution that is eligible to make an application. This can include departments, faculties or schools. Please refer to the awards handbook for full details on departments that are eligible.

An applicant

Refers to applications from institutions and departments.

Awards process

Refers to all stages of the process from submission, awards panel assessment, feedback and award conferment.

A working day

Working days are the days between and including Monday to Friday and do not include UK public holidays and weekends. If for example, ECU requests that something must be received within five working days on a Wednesday, ECU expects to receive it by 5pm the following Wednesday unless there are UK public holidays in between.

UK public holidays

UK public holidays do not include Scottish locally-determined public holidays. ECU will recognise St Andrew's Day as an additional public holiday for Scotland.

In writing

This refers to electronic and hard copy mailings.

ECU processes

ECU's equality charters manager will usually run the processes set out here.

If for any reason the equality charters manager is unavailable, or there is a conflict of interest, the head of equality charters will assume responsibility for that process.