The Future of Athena SWAN

The report of the Athena SWAN Charter Review Independent Steering Group for Advance HE March 2020

Appendix 2 – Key points emerging from the soft consultation
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The following discussion points are a summary of the discussions completed during the 41 focus groups held with institutions across the UK and the soft consultation survey results.

1 The overall benefits that Athena SWAN has brought are well recognised and highly valued across the sector.

1.1 Athena SWAN has had a very positive impact and brought gender issues to the fore in higher education. It has enabled conversations to happen at departmental and institutional levels, policies to change, good practice to be developed and shared and real progress to be made in terms of both culture and progression of women into senior roles. This is something to be proud of and champion.

1.2 It was noted that the name Athena SWAN has been questioned during the consultation and because of its association with STEMM, it has been suggested that the name could be repositioned to reflect the current breadth of the Charter while retaining the brand.

2 However, there are wide-spread concerns about the operation and sustainability of the current system.

2.1 As Athena SWAN has evolved it has become overly burdensome and costly and trust in the assessment process has diminished. Colleagues are concerned that so much time is invested in the application process, there is often little time left to focus on what matters – i.e. delivering the action plans and identifying further areas for development. The opportunity provided by the review has been welcomed. It was noted that the Steering Group need to respond to the sector’s concerns and address issues relating to the burden of work place on institutions and individual staff members in light of additional pressures i.e. TEF and KEF.

3 Who is Athena SWAN for?

3.1 A number of people have questioned whether a gender specific charter has had its time and whether the Steering Group should consider an all embracing inclusivity charter; these concerns are particularly linked to the underrepresentation and poor progression rates of BAME staff, recognised as a major issues in HE. There are mixed views about the value and impact of the recent introduction of data on intersectionality and noted that it was important to consult with the sector with suggestions of different models.

3.2 Others strongly favour retaining a gender charter and having additional charters to deal with ethnicity and race but recognise that a plethora of charters would bring a further increase in workload.
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3.3 The inclusion of academic staff from the social sciences, arts & humanities and business schools, and of professional staff in academic departments is welcomed. However, colleagues are uncomfortable that professional staff in academic departments is only considered fully in applications for Silver and Gold awards.

3.4 There is widespread support for extending the charter to include the professional service directorates (HR etc.). A more inclusive approach was welcomed but noted that this will inevitably involve further work for institutions and that (a) the consultation should include an open question on the groups of staff to be covered by the Charter – STEM, all academic staff regardless of discipline, all staff; and (b) that the composition of panels should be tailored to ensure they each include expertise in the discipline/area of the applications being considered.

4 Do we still need departmental awards?

4.1 The Steering Group should consider scraping departmental awards and replacing them with faculty or school awards. This approach would reduce the workload and avoid the complications introduced by restructuring or other changes in departmental structures.

4.2 There have been suggestions that an institutional-only award would suffice but more support was provided for keeping departmental and institutional awards. It was noted that the consultation should invite views on moving towards larger units of assessment and question the minimum and maximum size of school or faculty or other cognate unit that could be put forward as a unit for assessment.

4.3 It was proposed that institutions should be trusted to define the scope of their application and that the Athena SWAN framework would need to provide an assessment process to support each application.

5 Should awards be valid for a longer period?

5.1 The Steering Group should consider whether awards should be valid for a longer period, say 6 or 7 years (as REF) which would give applicants a reasonable time to effect real change. Departments/institutions should be able to resubmit at an earlier date if their applications were unsuccessful or if they are aiming for a higher grade. It was noted that the consultation should pose various options from 5-7 years +/- and a potential mid-award review.

6 Can we clarify the assessment criteria for each level of award?

6.1 Colleagues across the sector have raised concerns about their perceptions of moving goalposts and would like to see clear criteria for each level of award without turning the process into a tick box exercise (which some people feel it is already).

6.2 The Steering Group should oversee the development of clear criteria for each level of award together with a clear framework for assessment that would inform both applicants and assessors, and against which the assessment process could be held to account.
6.3 Colleagues struggle to understand why applications for renewal fail when they have presented clear evidence of improvements since their previous application – this is interpreted variously as mission creep, moving goalposts and inconsistency in the assessment process. It was agreed that to address these concerns that the Steering Group could setup a task and finish group to develop a clear framework for assessment which could be applied fairly and transparently and also recognise difference between subject areas. The group might also wish to explore whether the current blunt instrument of Bronze, Silver and Gold is the best form of recognition or whether other descriptors may be more appropriate.

7 Can the application process be simplified?

7.1 The current burden on staff is both unacceptable and unsustainable. An unforeseen consequence is that staff for whom the charter was originally intended are the very ones who are the most adversely affected by the workload which detracts from their academic work and, hence, limits their opportunity for promotion as this work largely goes unrecognised. While the value of the evidence base provided by data was recognised, the feedback indicates that the culture of the institution and department is as important and this needs to be reflected in the application and assessment process. If well designed, evaluation surveys could provide valuable information about culture as could site visits.

7.2 Several universities have thought of pulling out of Athena SWAN because of the workload and others (mainly teaching-heavy institutions) see it as ‘not for them’ and are looking for alternatives.

7.3 Several groups highlighted Stonewall as a good example of a relatively simple process that allows benchmarking.

7.4 It was noted that departments/institutions would benefit from more guidance as they developed their proposals. It was suggested that an important role for Advance HE would be to visit departments/institutions to advise and help them with the development of their application. Ideally applications should not be submitted prematurely; proactive support from Advance HE in the development phase would help to prevent this.

7.5 It was suggested that the application form should not be prescriptive; rather it should enable institutions/departments to decide what is important to them and shape their applications accordingly. A new framework for the assessment criteria should reflect the potential diversity in the shape and content of applications. This would be important in ensuring that the Charter embraces the diversity of the universities, small specialist institutions and research institutes across the sector.
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8    Dealing with the data burden

8.1 The value of evidence-based submissions is well recognised and valued.

8.2 However, the collection and reporting of data is a major concern. It requires a huge investment of time and is not sustainable. The current data requirements do not fit with standard university reporting requirements to e.g. HESA. Colleagues would welcome access to a common data base from which information could be downloaded. This would also enable effective benchmarking against peers which many are keen to see.

8.3 There are also concerns about inappropriate use of statistics and the ‘pressure’ people feel under to demonstrate meaningful change in a short period of time.

8.4 Some colleagues consider that the application process should place more emphasis on improvements in culture and effective implementation of policies rather than interpretation (or over interpretation) of data.

8.5 Applications should include evidence of effective mechanisms to address issues such as bullying and sexual harassment. It was agreed that the Steering Group should explore how the important issues of bullying and harassment could be addressed in the revised charter.

8.6 The Steering Group should explore whether the data included in Athena SWAN application could be derived from HESA. This would reduce the workload and also allow benchmarking which departments/institutions would find useful.

9 Focused action plans

9.1 Staff claim they feel under pressure to be ambitious in their action plans and sometimes have a preconceived idea of what must be included for success – i.e. that there is an essential ‘must do’ list and they will fail if they don’t include them all.

9.2 Action plans are too long and often have little chance of delivery within the time-frame of the award. It was agreed that action plans should be shorter and focused; it was proposed that they should be no more than one side of A4 and that a question on the size and format of action plans should be included in the consultation.

9.3 Several individuals have commented that effective action plans normally focus on at most 3 or 4 key points for development – as in a grant application which focuses on a specific piece of work to be done in a given time.
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10 The nature of the application form

10.1 The nature of the application form has been widely criticised – some consider it too long and some too restrictive in length. Others have drawn attention to ‘lean businesses’ where one side of A3 would be the maximum allowed and suggested that the Steering Group learn from this. It was agreed to seek views on the shape of the application form as part of the consultation process to help the Steering Group make recommendations for change.

10.2 Various ideas have been proposed to shorten the form – for example a two-side application form with 10% of applications being followed up with a site visit to verify the contents of the application.

10.3 The Steering Group should consider introducing a light touch process for renewal applications – just short report on progress and an updated action plan as a part of the review.

11 Dealing with perceived inconsistencies in the assessment process

11.1 Criterion based assessment was regarded as important to resolve this. Assessment must be objective not subjective. The introduction of clear criteria against which applications are assessed would help to deal with the perceived inconsistencies in the assessment process and improve transparency.

11.2 There is a lack of awareness of the training provided for panel members and some suggestions that the training was not of sufficient quality.

11.3 The training process for panel members should be reviewed and all panel members should have regular ‘refresher’ courses. It is essential that the academic community has confidence in rigour of the training and assessment processes.

11.4 Panels should include a senior academic who understands the disciplines covered in the applications being reviewed.

11.5 Clarity is need about the decision making process. When is moderation used and when does the chair of the panel make the final decision?

11.6 It was suggested that the current Athena SWAN panels should be replaced by panels of experts. Each panel should include at least one subject specialist (including professional services) to provide context to the review and decision making process. In addition, panels might also include a lay member from outside the sector.

11.7 It was agreed that there would be merit in including a site visit in the assessment process as such visits were common place in academia and would provide an invaluable insight into culture and behaviour as well as an opportunity to discuss the application with the applicants.

11.8 Consideration should be given to replacing the current pass/fail system with a system of awarded or referred. Advance HE should work institutions/departments whose applications are referred to help them improve and reach the standards required and advise them when to resubmit. The interval between referral and resubmission should be flexible, enabling departments to resubmit when they are ready.
11.9 It was agreed that panel decisions should be final and communicated to applicants immediately.

11.10 The proposed process would require a core of experts drawn from institutions to provide expert subject-specific advice. This would require institutions to release individuals on a part-time basis, as happens currently for the work of research grant panels. The resource implications for institutions would need to be considered. The work could provide a career development opportunity for individuals, particularly if recognised in annual appraisals, and would also be an opportunity to spread good practice within their own institution.

12 Panel feedback

12.1 The Steering Group should explore ways in which panel feedback can be improved to ensure that it is timely, sensitive and constructive and not prescriptive.

12.2 Advance HE should inform applicants of the outcome of their applications immediately after the panel has reached its decision. The current process of announcing awards for each round at the same time is very stressful for applicants and creates a competitive element which is inappropriate.

12.3 It has been suggested that the assessment process should not be pass/fail but applications that do not meet the requirement for an award should be referred for revision with support and guidance from Advance HE. This proactive positive approach would build trust and bring benefits to all parties.

12.4 Can the work of Panel members be recognised formally – for example, through a ‘micro credential’?

12.5 Should assessment panels include student representatives?

13 Engagement with Advance HE

13.1 There would be benefit in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) staff engaging more closely with applicants at the early stage of the process to guide and support them as they develop their application.

13.2 It would be beneficial to institutions, and Advance HE, if Advance HE staff spent more time in academic institutions, perhaps through a series of secondments and/or through focused support during the application process.

14 Linkage of award to eligibility for grant funding

14.1 This has provided an effective ‘stick’ in that the number of applications from departments seeking grant funding from NIHR has risen significantly.

14.2 Colleagues are generally unhappy about the link of awards to grant funding because the negative impact it has on careers of talented staff who (a) are based in departments that do not hold the appropriate award or (b) are caught up in a restructure and find themselves no longer eligible for an award.
15 Who ‘owns’ Athena SWAN

15.1 This issue of ownership of the Charter has been raised by several groups and there is a lack of clarity about whether it is owned by Advance HE or by the sector. The strong support for the Charter in the sector was noted and in essence it is a bottom up rather than top down process, therefore ownership should sit with those people at the local levels. However, from a governance perspective, clear and transparent oversight is needed. Should individual universities be asked to sign up to both the principles and the operational elements?

15.2 The Steering Group should consider whether UUK should sign the charter on behalf of the sector. If institutions were required to sign the Charter, as currently, rather than UUK, this would make a clear statement and increase the likelihood that senior teams and governing bodies embedding the principles of the charter in their institutional strategies and of senior teams being held to account for delivery.

15.3 Institutional signatures should ensure Athena SWAN is embraced in institutional strategy and governance – this should help to encourage recognition of those who drive Athena SWAN forward in the institution, as well as ensuring that gender equality is seen as a priority by the institution.

15.4 It was suggested that Athena SWAN should be employer orientated, perhaps involving trade unions etc. to provide support for institutions. This could mean creating a new governance structure for the charter including senior leaders from universities (VCs, PVCs, Directors of HR, NUS representatives and unions). If a new model were adopted the relationship of the governing body to Advance HE would need to be clarified.

15.5 There is a widespread view that HE is very inward looking and that we should engage with other businesses which are well ahead of us.

15.6 The HR Excellence Award in Research and Stonewall are possible examples of good practice.

15.7 It was noted that there would be merit in engaging with experts beyond the sector and that if Athena SWAN had an overarching governing body, it should include lay members.

15.8 Any new model would need to affordable and developed in collaboration with the sector.