

**David Ruebain**  
Chief Executive,  
Equality Challenge Unit

## Evaluating the Athena SWAN Charter: **ECU response**

ECU's Athena SWAN Charter has come a long way since it was launched with ten founding university members in 2005, with a steadily expanding membership and increasing public profile. We now have 100 university members, have recently welcomed research institutes into the Charter, and later this year we will be running a pilot with the Irish higher education sector. External bodies, such as the Department of Health, Research Councils UK, Royal Society of Edinburgh and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, have publically affirmed that the achievement of a silver-level award is evidence of a commitment to gender equality. It is clear that the programme is increasingly valued as a vehicle for organisational change and for addressing historic underrepresentation and disadvantage.

In 2011 ECU undertook an internal evaluation which found clear evidence of the impact that Athena SWAN has had at institutional level and for individuals. The research identified impact on organisational structure and culture change, with increases in the proportion of women, better representation of women on committees, improvements in the transition from postdoctoral researcher to first academic post, improved working practices to support career progression and growth in women's networking across institutions.

As Athena SWAN continues to grow, and is referenced by others as a requirement or expectation, we wanted to further examine the effectiveness of the Charter in advancing women's careers, the impact on culture and attitudes and the sustainability of those changes.

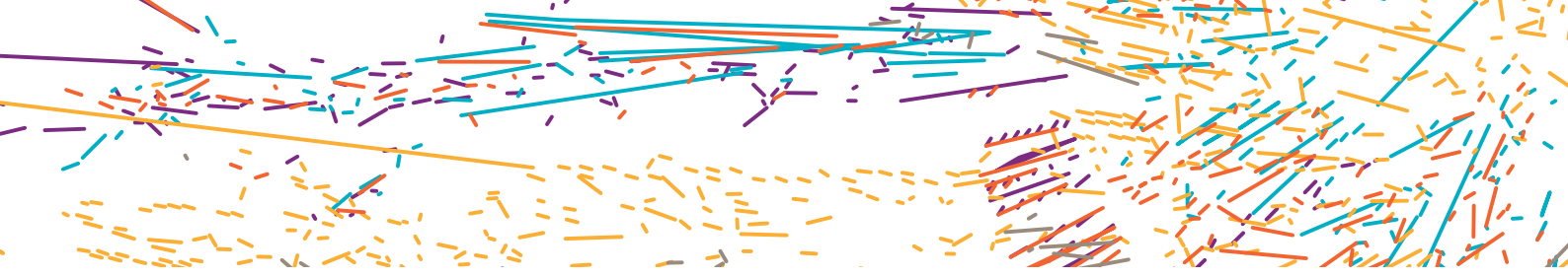


Equality Challenge Unit



With this in mind, in 2013 we commissioned a team from Loughborough University to undertake a comprehensive, independent assessment of the impact and benefit of the Athena SWAN Charter on participating higher education institutions (HEIs) and on the wider sector. We were particularly interested in discovering differences across award levels and disciplines, and also investigating the differences between members and eligible institutions that are not part of the Charter.

The full evaluation report and executive summary are available on our website [www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/evaluating-athena-swan](http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/evaluating-athena-swan).



## Key findings

The Loughborough research team found considerable evidence of the positive impact of Athena SWAN on the career development and satisfaction of women working in STEMM as well as evidence of the value of Athena SWAN as a driver for improving gender diversity.

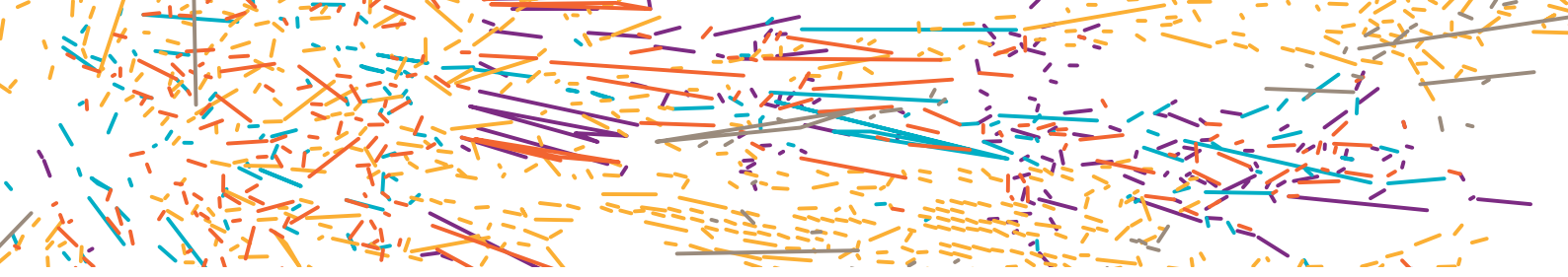
- = The report found that in many areas institutions and departments that hold an Athena SWAN award were more advanced than those that did not.
- = There was evidence that some changes in culture and attitude had been achieved, and considerable evidence that the changes that were implemented as a result of the Athena SWAN process were sustainable.
- = There are positive differences between departments achieving different award levels.
- = It isn't just academic staff who benefit. Administrative and technical staff in silver departments felt they had more support for their career development and progression than in departments without awards.
- = The research also identified a number of issues that continue to prevent women from reaching their full potential in the STEMM field. It found that there is yet to be a significant impact on postgraduate student experience, and very little on the undergraduate population.
- = Although most respondents value the awards process and found the workload involved to be appropriate, some departmental champions feel that it creates an excessive burden. Respondents raised specific issues with some aspects of the Athena SWAN process.

---

## Recommendations for ECU

As we come up to the ten-year anniversary of the charter, this evaluation has been an opportunity for us to take stock, and to make sure the processes and approaches are fit for purpose. We are not going to rest on our successes, but to build on them.

The report sets out a number of recommendations for ECU that will help us continue to refine and improve our processes so that Athena SWAN remains an effective tool for HEIs and a valuable benchmark for excellence in gender equality. We are already in the process of rolling out developments focusing on several of the issues identified in the recommendations.



**= Increase collaboration**

The Athena SWAN regional networks are continuing to identify opportunities for collaborative working with HEIs inviting network members to relevant activities that they are running and plans are in place in a number of networks to run joint events.

**= Share examples of best practice**

Examples of best practice are shared in the Athena SWAN awards booklet and we are also planning to produce a series of good practice factsheets.

**= Need for a gender balance in Athena SWAN involvement**

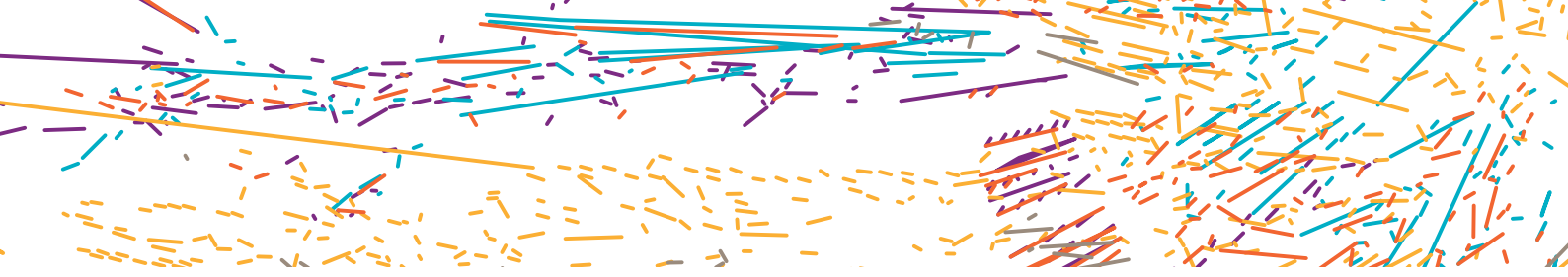
While Athena SWAN is a charter for improving the opportunities for women working in STEMM and therefore women are more likely to engage with the programme, we continue to require a mix of men and women on Athena SWAN panels and self-assessment teams, and encourage men to become Athena SWAN champions. The applications from three of the four current gold-award departments were championed by men, suggesting that gender balance plays a role in achieving change.

**= Highlight that the Charter addresses inequality for men as well as women**

While Athena SWAN asks for evidence on how women are affected by initiatives, it is clear that the work within member institutions is benefiting all staff, including men. Building on the experiences of Athena SWAN, ECU is developing a gender equality charter mark that aims to address gender inequality in the arts, humanities and social sciences. This programme, which is currently being trialled with a number of partner HEIs, enables institutions to look at the experiences of both male and female staff and to develop actions which will remove barriers and promote equality for both women and men. We will consider if aspects of the new charter mark are appropriate for inclusion in the Athena SWAN Charter as it develops.

**= Engaging small departments**

It is important to us that the size of a department shouldn't preclude its involvement in the charter. Depending on the context, smaller departments can submit as a faculty, or enter a joint submission with another department. We will continue to encourage smaller institutions to take part.



**= Clarifying achievement levels**

We are currently piloting a process for institutions that are seeking to renew their bronze awards that we hope will address some of the concerns identified in the report around the required criteria. We are also considering more specific guidance on the elements that HEIs should focus on to demonstrate achievement at the different award levels.

**= Streamlining the application processes**

A revised Athena SWAN application form is being trialled in November 2014. We are currently running focus groups about the use and presentation of data which will inform the development of the application form.

**= Ensuring consistency in panel decisions**

We are developing further training for Athena SWAN panellists and taking steps to provide clearer guidance on assessment criteria for self assessment teams.

**= Support visits to applicants**

Providing support visits to all applicants is currently beyond the Charter's resources, especially in light of the continued increase in applications. However, we are committed to giving the matter due consideration and to find ways to better support applicants.

---

## **Learning from the findings**

Accordingly, the forthcoming year will see further development of the Charter. ECU will continue to improve our support to enable institutions and departments to be accurately and fairly assessed and be recognised for the progress that they are making toward gender equality in STEMM.

The feedback and recommendations from this evaluation will inform the future development of ECU's gender equality charter mark and race equality charter mark.