

Evaluating the effectiveness and impact of the Athena SWAN Charter

Executive summary



Equality Challenge Unit



**Athena
SWAN**

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The full report is available on our website:

Advancing women's careers in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine: evaluating the effectiveness and impact of the Athena SWAN Charter

www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/evaluating-athena-swan

Further information

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Introduction

Higher education mirrors the general UK workforce pattern whereby women are usually well represented in universities as a whole, but there is a lack of women in senior positions, particularly in academic posts.

Disciplinary differences are also evident with women best represented in language-based studies and worst represented in science, engineering and technology (SET), where in 2011 only 15% of professors were female. This pattern is also evident across the wider science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine subject group (STEM/STEMM).

To contribute to addressing these issues, the Athena SWAN Charter award scheme was established in 2005, recognising employment excellence for women in higher education in SET, and more recently in STEMM. The Charter is owned and managed by Equality Challenge Unit (ECU). Participating institutions and departments can submit for Athena SWAN awards at Gold, Silver and Bronze award levels.

In 2013 ECU commissioned a research team from Loughborough University to examine the impact of the Athena SWAN Charter in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK including:

- = the effectiveness of the Charter in advancing women's careers in STEMM
- = the sustainability of the changes that HEIs are making as a result of their participation in Athena SWAN
- = the impact of the Athena SWAN Charter in changing the culture and attitudes across the participating HEIs to address inequality and unequal representation
- = the suitability of Athena SWAN processes for use in complex and busy institutional environments

It was also anticipated that the research would add to the body of literature describing and analysing the different experiences of women and men in HEIs.

Methods

The approach adopted involved two complementary strands of work.

- = Programme-wide survey data collection across a sample of HEIs involved in the programme stratified by institutional and departmental Athena SWAN award level together with a sample of HEIs holding no award (28 institutions, 41 departments, 2645 staff and 2051 students returned surveys).
- = Nine in-depth case studies conducted with particular HEIs in three different categories: HEIs holding institutional and departmental awards, HEIs holding an institutional award only, and HEIs holding no awards.

Key findings

Effectiveness of the Charter in advancing women's careers in STEMM

There was considerable evidence from the institutional and departmental champions survey and from the academic/research staff and administrative/technical staff survey that career satisfaction, opportunities for training and development, knowledge of promotion processes and fairness in the allocation of workload was considered better in the Silver award and other Athena SWAN category groups than in no award departments. There was also some evidence that women had benefited from Athena SWAN to a greater extent than men. However, Athena SWAN seemed to have had a limited impact on postgraduate students and had not yet reached the undergraduate population.

- = Nearly all of Athena SWAN institutional champions (90%) and the vast majority of departmental champions (81%) agreed Athena SWAN had impacted positively on gender issues.
- = Most institutional champions (65%) and about half of departmental champions (52%) agreed that there had been a positive impact on women's career progression
- = Academic/research staff in Silver award departments were more satisfied with their career performance/development review and with opportunities for training and development than staff in no award departments.
- = Academic/research staff in all Athena SWAN category departments (Silver, Bronze and institutional Bronze award) were more familiar with the processes for promotion, more likely to have received rewards for their work and rated their university higher for the promotion of equality and diversity than staff in no award departments.
- = Fairness of workload allocation was rated higher by academic/research staff in Silver award than in no award departments, but women rated the fairness of workload and transparency of the workload model lower than men.

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- = Women academic/research staff felt that Athena SWAN had improved their visibility, increased self-confidence, enhanced their leadership skills, helped them to think more broadly about gender issues and had impacted positively on their career development to a greater extent than men.
 - = The pattern of response to survey statements was similar for academic staff and research staff, but there were fewer statistically significant differences for research staff, and often lower ratings to statements, which may reflect less impact in the research staff grouping.
 - = For administrative/technical staff perceptions of support from their university and from their school/department for career development and progression were more positive in departments with a Silver award than in no award departments.
 - = There was some limited evidence that postgraduate students in some Athena SWAN award departments had a better experience of their postgraduate studies, felt more strongly that they had increased their knowledge of science and research, and had better access to academic role models than in no award departments.
 - = Female students across all departments (award and no award) were less optimistic about their prospects for successfully combining family life with a career in their field.
 - = The Athena SWAN award process did not yet seem to have impacted upon undergraduate students based on the lack of differences in responses across Athena SWAN award and no award categories to nearly all questions on the undergraduate survey.
 - = Female undergraduates across all departments (award and no award) though were less confident than male undergraduates in approaching staff, and male staff, for advice and were less confident about their career prospects in the field than male undergraduates.

There was considerable evidence from interviews and focus groups in the case studies that Athena SWAN had impacted positively on institutional practices within participating HEIs.

- = The Athena SWAN application process and award have provided credibility, focus and impetus for gender work that was already taking place within HEIs.
- = The data-collection processes for Athena SWAN submissions enabled HEIs to identify challenges to gender equality that were relevant to their HEI and departments.
- = In some HEIs the practices developed through Athena SWAN have impacted on departments beyond STEM.
- = Changes to institutional practice identified through involvement with Athena SWAN include efforts focused on promotion, supporting women returners, improved communication systems to ensure all voices are heard and scheduling meetings to accommodate part-time staff.
- = Facilitating factors for delivering institutional change include the involvement of senior committed individuals who exert influence and are visible role models.
- = Linking Athena SWAN to research funding was a contentious issue with some interviewees suggesting this was needed in some HEIs in order to motivate involvement with gender equality issues, whilst other interviewees felt that this link was problematic, particularly because Athena SWAN awards are not standard based.
- = Persistent barriers impacting on delivering institutional change included recognition that delivering cultural change remains extremely challenging in any HEI.

Sustainability of the changes that HEIs are making as a result of their participation in Athena SWAN

There was considerable evidence from the institutional and departmental champions survey that the changes implemented as a result of the Athena SWAN process were sustainable.

- = At the time of the institutional and departmental champions' surveys, 100% of university and 95% of departmental self-assessment teams (the Athena SWAN process for identifying and providing solutions to gender inequalities) were ongoing/ currently active with most formally embedded within the respective university and departmental committee structures.
- = The most important actions since receiving an Athena SWAN institutional award were increased departmental engagement in the process, the putting in place of structures and data collection systems, increased engagement of university senior management in the process, improved processes for promotion and reward/review panels, the development of mentoring systems targeted at women, the appointment of designated Athena SWAN officers, changes to the maternity leave cover process, and the development of women's networking and leadership training events.
- = The most important actions since receiving an Athena SWAN departmental award were enhanced communication within the department concerning equality and diversity matters, in particular the sharing of survey findings and proposed solutions, support and encouragement for women academics to apply for promotion, and ensuring the voice of postdoctoral researchers is heard and acted upon.
- = Overwhelmingly institutions reported that they had applied for an Athena SWAN award because it was the 'right thing to do' and because of their commitment to gender equality.

The findings from the case studies also suggested that practices introduced as a result of Athena SWAN had been incorporated at both strategic and operational levels within participating HEIs in that:

- = practices were championed by very senior people within HEIs
- = HEIs had dedicated staff resources for managing the Athena SWAN process, which reflected their commitment to the process and the embedding of Athena SWAN within normal HEI practice
- = as HEIs became more experienced with Athena SWAN they developed more sophisticated data-collection processes to identify key issues and to monitor progress against action plans
- = departments also sought to identify ways in which resources could be best dedicated to support Athena SWAN which is reflected in the formation of sub-groups and in some HEIs this work was reflected in the workload model
- = collaborations and networks were instigated or re-invigorated through Athena SWAN as HEI staff sought to complete the submission process, and to identify and deliver effective practice in promoting gender equality
- = revisions to existing practices and processes within HEIs have arisen as a result of involvement with Athena SWAN including revisions to promotion processes and the development of new avenues for staff to acquire the skills they require for promotion

Impact of the Athena SWAN Charter in changing the culture and attitudes across the participating HEIs to address inequality and unequal representation

There was evidence from the academic/research and administrative/technical survey responses that some changes in culture and attitude had been achieved.

- = Academic/research staff reported that Athena SWAN had had a greater impact on the work environment and work practices in Silver and Bronze award departments than in departments within an institution with a Bronze award, but no departmental award.
- = Administrative/technical staff in Silver award schools/ departments in comparison with no award departments made more use of flexible working, and staff in all Athena SWAN categories rated their department higher than staff in no award departments for the statement 'The school/department actively promotes a healthy work-life balance'.
- = Administrative/technical staff in Silver award departments gave a higher rating than staff in institutional Bronze award departments to the statements that the Athena SWAN process and awards had had a positive impact on the work environment and work practices of their school/department.
- = Administrative and technical staff felt a greater sense of belonging in all Athena SWAN category departments than in no award departments.

The findings of the case studies also indicted some cultural changes within participating HEIs, but there was variation in both the nature and extent of the changes between HEIs:

- = the visible representation of more women in key positions and senior roles was a widely reported positive change
- = some interviewees reported that they had witnessed positive changes within their HEIs in terms of staff recruitment as a result of being involved with Athena SWAN

Suitability of Athena SWAN processes for use in complex and busy institutional environments

Both the survey data and qualitative findings revealed that the Athena SWAN process and award was considered to be of great value and generally the workload was considered to be 'appropriate' by institutional champions and 'appropriate' or 'excessive' by departmental champions.

'It's [Athena SWAN] the most effective standard/process/lever for change I've come across in 12 years of equality work, including impact assessment.'

Institutional champion

- = Institutional champions had been in post for 1–2 years (40%) or more than 3 years (29%) and were generally female (73%), white British (92%), senior academics or senior administrators with an equality and diversity role.
- = Departmental champions were generally female (80%), white British (75%) or white other (19%) with their main role most commonly cited as reader (26%), senior lecturer (23%) or professor (20%).
- = The time for completion of the paperwork for the most recent university submission was 6–12 months (39%), and less than 6 months (44%) or 6–12 months (38%) for the most recent departmental submission.
- = University and departmental self-assessment teams met on an average of six and seven occasions respectively, with 'a great deal of work being undertaken in between meetings'.
- = The burden of the workload of the submission was considered to fall on the champions and on human resources staff with institutional champions considering the workload 'appropriate' and departmental champions split between considering the workload 'excessive' (49%) and 'appropriate' (49%).

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- = Suggestions for improvements to the Athena SWAN process included clearer guidance or a template for the presentation of quantitative data, the removal of replication and repetition across sections, the need for a question concerning the proportion of staff attending equality and diversity training and some subject-specific points, particularly for medicine.
 - = Suggestions for improvements to the Athena SWAN assessment process included providing clearer guidelines for the assessment team and assessor training, considering the possibility of some visits, particularly for Gold awards, asking more probing questions in terms of the funding of maternity cover and maternity cover for short-term contracts, and to provide clearer assessment criteria.

Recommendations for ECU

A key strength of the Athena SWAN process is that it facilitates more collaborative work both within and across HEIs. It is recommended that ECU continue to support, promote and publicise these collaborative opportunities.

HEIs were able to identify, but not always able to address, the challenges associated with gender equality in their institutions and departments. It recommended that ECU continue to share examples of effective practice in meeting the challenges to promoting gender equality.

This study has confirmed that gender-equality work within academia is predominantly characterised as being driven by women with the assistance of some men. It is recommended that this is an issue that is given consideration by ECU.

Gender-equality work is considered by some academic staff, both male and female, to be focused on pursuing improvements for women rather than addressing inequality for both females and males. It is recommended that ECU consider ways in which this misconception can be addressed.

A persistent issue for ECU is engaging staff, departments and HEIs that face particular challenges in promoting gender equality. An example of such challenges is departments with very few staff or disciplines that struggle to attract women due to issues of supply. It recommended that ECU consider the introduction of a 'pre-Bronze' or 'small department award' to engage these groups in the process.

The link between Athena SWAN and research funding is a controversial issue particularly because Athena SWAN is not a standard-based award (i.e. two HEIs with a Bronze award may be at very different stages in their progress, especially where one of the awards is a renewal). It is recommended that ECU continue to consider how this tension can be addressed satisfactorily.

It is recommended that ECU consider the suggestions made by HEI staff for improvements to the Athena SWAN process and assessment process.

Recommendations for HEIs

For HEIs and departments relatively new to the Athena SWAN process or looking to move up to the next award level, it is suggested that it might be helpful to consider the most important actions taken in the Athena SWAN process as stated by the institutional and departmental champions who participated in this study.

The most important actions taken since receiving an Athena SWAN institutional award were:

- = increased departmental engagement in the Athena SWAN process
- = the putting in place of structures and data-collection systems
- = increased engagement of university senior management in the Athena SWAN process
- = improved processes for promotion and reward/review panels
- = the development of mentoring systems targeted at women
- = the appointment of designated Athena SWAN officers
- = changes to the maternity leave cover process
- = the development of women's networking and leadership training events

The most important actions taken since receiving an Athena SWAN departmental award were:

- = enhanced communication within the department concerning equality and diversity matters, in particular the sharing of survey findings and proposed solutions
- = enhanced support and encouragement for women academics to apply for promotion
- = ensuring the voice of postdoctoral researchers was heard and acted upon



Equality Challenge Unit

ECU works to further and support equality and diversity for staff and students in higher education across all four nations of the UK, and in colleges in Scotland.

ECU works closely with colleges and universities to seek to ensure that staff and students are not unfairly excluded, marginalised or disadvantaged because of age, disability, gender identity, marital or civil partnership status, pregnancy or maternity status, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation or through any combination of these characteristics or other unfair treatment.

Providing a central source of expertise, research, advice and leadership, we support institutions in building a culture that provides equality of both opportunity and outcome, promotes good relations, values the benefits of diversity and provides a model of equality for the wider UK society.

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