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## The Athena SWAN Charter: Promoting Commitment to Gender Equality in Higher Education Institutions in the UK

Sarah Barnard

### 1 Introduction

In 2011, a statement, from the Chief Medical Officer of the British Medical Research Council, outlined that in future competitions for the National Institute for Health Research funding, they did not expect to shortlist any academic partner without Athena SWAN silver award status. This announcement sent ripples through the UK higher education (HE) sector. The move to link research funding to active engagement with gender equality initiatives underlined a strategic step-change in the face of enduring gender inequalities in the sector.

Using the Success Case Method outlined in [Chapter 1](#), this chapter will provide a detailed overview of the Athena SWAN Charter, how it has been adopted across different institutions in the UK, what impact it has had so far, with a reflection on what it means in practice for an

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institution aiming to address gender equality. The Charter has been extremely influential in the UK HE context, as ‘many organisations have recently been competing to demonstrate that they welcome and embrace diversity’ (Ruebain 2012, p. 5), through participation in schemes that the UK’s Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) delivers on gender and race.<sup>1</sup>

Recognition of the importance of policies and practices that embed gender equality concerns into the normal business of the organisation is one of the principles that underpin the Athena SWAN Charter’s objectives, in that sustainable change requires the responsibility for addressing gender equality to accompany other important strategic objectives in higher education institutions (HEIs). The adoption of ‘good practice’ around employment and gender equality is argued to be beneficial for both men and women, while also recognising the ways women are particularly affected by poor working practices (Ashdown 2008, p. 1). This means that while Athena SWAN is positioned clearly as a gender equality initiative, institutions recognise the broader benefits of evaluating organisational practices. Kulik (2014) argues that there should be more ‘above the line’ research focusing on policies and strategies adopted. Consequently, this chapter will map the policies and practices adopted by Athena SWAN Gold Award holding departments and reflect on how the ECU defines success in gender equality in HE. Building on this, a case study institution is used to reflect on engagement with the Charter and how it promotes commitment to gender equality.

## 2 The Athena SWAN Charter

In the early 2000s, the Athena project ‘Scientific Women’s Academic Network’ (SWAN) was established as a web-based resource (Phipps 2008). The concept was successful and the Athena SWAN Charter was formally created in 2005 to address the unequal representation of women and to encourage and recognise commitment to advancing the careers of women in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine (STEMM)

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the Athena SWAN Charter, ECU run a Gender Equality Charter and a Race Equality Charter.

employment in HE and research (ECU 2015). Over recent years it has broadened its scope to research institutes that do not hold HEI status, to professional, support and technical staff and to the disciplines outside of STEMM. There are different levels – bronze, silver and gold – that can be awarded at either an institutional or department<sup>2</sup> level. An institutional or department submission is put together by a Self-Assessment Team (SAT) that usually has a chair, sometimes termed an ‘Athena SWAN Champion’. The institutional Athena SWAN champion role, or the SAT Chair if that term is not used, is normally carried out by a senior member of university staff (e.g. a pro vice-chancellor or school dean).<sup>3</sup>

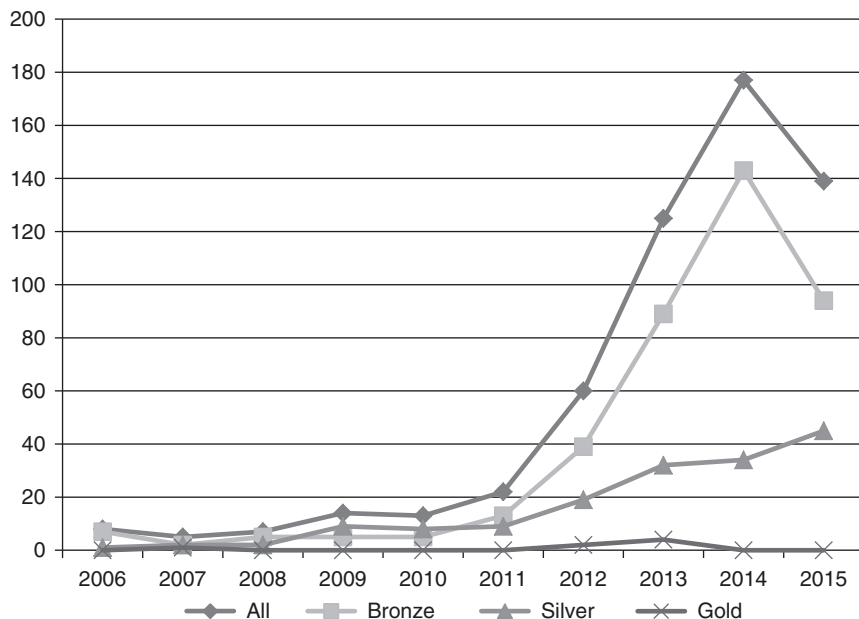
The primacy of evidence and action is demonstrated in the requirements for the different levels of award, and submissions are built on two key interlinked aspects: data collection and analysis, and an action plan. Universities and departments are also required to provide evidence of ‘good practice’ that goes beyond what is required by national legislative frameworks.

Since its establishment, the Charter has been more successful in terms of sector engagement than anticipated, particularly since changes to research funding conditions. Applications for awards increased slowly from 2006 to 2012, and increased sharply since late 2012 (Ruebain 2015). There has been growth in awards granted, particularly between 2011 and 2014 and at the bronze level (see Fig. 8.1). Despite a decrease in awards being granted by the ECU in 2015, the overall growth in applications is likely to continue: since 2015 the Charter has been expanded to include arts, humanities, social sciences, business and law (AHSSBL) (ECU 2015). Furthermore, evidence of international influence of the UK initiative can be found: the Higher Education Authority in Ireland facilitated the expansion of Athena SWAN to

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Department’ is the term that Athena SWAN uses to refer to departments, schools and faculties – in the UK many university disciplinary divisions are organised as ‘schools’ rather than departments.

<sup>3</sup> Research carried out by the author found that the institutional position of the person chairing the University SAT or taking on the role of Athena SWAN Champion, varied between institutions. Examples of those leading on this include: Pro Vice-Chancellor; Women in STEM project manager; School Dean; Provost’s Envoy for Gender Equality; Head of Organisation Development; Director of Strategic Initiatives; and academics at a Professor level.



**Fig. 8.1** All Athena SWAN awards granted in 2006–2014

Source: Equality Challenge Unit, data provided to the author

include Ireland as one element in tackling gender inequality in the Irish HE sector (HEA 2016)<sup>4</sup> and the Australian Academy of Science created Sage, an Australian version of the Athena SWAN Charter in 2015.

### 3 Gold Award Departments and Athena SWAN Actions

Currently, seven departments hold Athena SWAN Gold Department Awards – no University as a whole has achieved the gold institution-level award. [Table 8.1](#) outlines the departments, institutions and date of Gold

<sup>4</sup>This development was driven by INTEGER and supported by FESTA, GENOVATE (all projects funded by the European Commission) and ultimately by all HEIs.

**Table 8.1** Departmental Gold Award holders

Institution	Department	Gold Award held since
University of York	Department of Chemistry	30/11/2007
University of Edinburgh	School of Chemistry	30/04/2012
Queen's University Belfast	School of Biological Sciences	30/11/2012
Imperial College London	Department of Chemistry	30/04/2013
Queen's University Belfast	School of Psychology	30/11/2013
University of Cambridge	Department of Physics – The Cavendish Laboratory	30/11/2013
University of York	Department of Biology	30/11/2013

*Source:* Equality Challenge Unit, data provided to the author

Award recipients. All but one is based in the sciences, with three of the seven awards in chemistry departments.

Drawing on the gold department submission documentation, this section maps the initiatives planned or put in place by Gold Award holding departments. The purpose of this analysis is to provide an overview of how Athena SWAN defines success in implementing gender equality actions in HE contexts. This synthesises best practice across the sector, highlighting possible activities that other institutions may wish to adopt. It also develops a landscape view of what is considered best practice, so we can better identify trends in this area, assumptions on which equality work is based and any gaps.

The analysis shows that the majority of actions are either cross-cutting, in terms of relating to staff at all levels in the department, or focused on early career researchers (ECRs).<sup>5</sup> Despite the broad scope of the Athena SWAN Charter, there is less emphasis on carrying out specific actions to support mid-career and senior academics, or on increasing the proportion of women at management level.

<sup>5</sup> This term broadly refers to PhD students, post-doctoral research staff and those within six years of their first academic appointment.

### 3.1 Cross-Cutting Actions to Promote Gender Equality

Across the departments examined, there are activities that relate to the organisational culture and processes that form the context for women at all career stages, and are therefore defined as cross-cutting actions. A broad theme is the embedding of Athena SWAN into the normal business of departments through equality and diversity committees – a gender mainstreaming approach (Rubery 2003; Stratigaki 2005). Examples of this include the consideration of disaggregated data on recruitment, research and teaching activities, promotions and pay increases at senior management level, commissioning empirical data collection to further investigate particular issues and the Athena SWAN responsibility being distributed across senior management groups. The Department of Biology at York University states that all committees' terms of reference include equality requirements. Fairness in recruitment is enhanced through the composition of gender-balanced panels or panels with at least one academic woman and training in unconscious bias, which is argued to be a key issue for gender equality (Henley 2015). There has also been work on the gender balance in the targeting of potential applicants and reporting on gender composition of those targeted by search committees.

Other aspects of fairness are in relation to allocation of teaching, administration and research. University departments are increasingly adopting workload models (WLMs) to track the different strands of academic work and allocate teaching or administrative duties on the basis of existing commitments. Different departments and universities use differing approaches to WLMs; for example, the total annual hours may differ, as well as the hours automatically allocated to research activities (research-intensive institutions may allocate higher proportions of hours for research than teaching-intensive institutions). Departments can look at the WLMs through a gender lens and see whether women academics are over-represented in particular areas (often teaching and administration) or under-represented in others (often research). Gold Award departments try to ensure fairness in the allocation of teaching, administration and research to counter trends that may disadvantage women in terms of career development.

Activities to develop inclusive organisational cultures are also common, as departments look to enhance community aspects and promote a ‘family friendly’ culture through formal and informal social and professional events. Research recognises that motherhood and caring commitments are barriers to success (Monroe et al. 2008) and that lack of institutional support for mothers is an issue (Henley 2015). Gold Award departments tackle this through emphasising flexible working provision to employees and potential applicants, covering childcare costs for those attending interviews (Physics, Cambridge), specific return to work policies that ensure women have time to focus on research before being allocated teaching, possibilities to move between part-time and full-time contracts (Psychology, Queen’s University Belfast [QUB]), on-site nursery provision and collecting feedback from those who return to work following parental leave (Chemistry, Imperial College London [ICL]).

### 3.2 Initiatives for Early Career Researchers

The mapping analysis demonstrates actions that focus on early career researchers as the dominant area of activity for these departments. The transition from post-doctoral research to academic post is a key point at which women’s representation drops (SHE Figures 2015). In response to this general trend across the sector, Gold Award departments integrate ECRs into the organisation and offer career and personal development support. Integration is encouraged through the development of networking opportunities, inclusion in committees and staff meetings. Formal networks for ECRs enable the development of a visible identity and representation of the concerns of this group. The Department of Chemistry, Edinburgh, has formed a post-doctoral society and QUB’s Biological Sciences Department has a post-doctoral forum that promotes opportunities for career advancement, networking, social interaction and general support, as well as providing a voice for all post-doctoral staff. The study of Caffrey et al. (2016) showed that ECRs, particularly at post-doctoral researcher level, had difficulties accessing Athena SWAN initiatives due to

communication issues and lack of support from line managers for personal development; therefore the Gold Award departments' actions can be seen as trying to address these limitations.

The career development of ECRs is encouraged through mentoring schemes and tailored support: the Chemistry Department at York provides CV/interviews, one-to-one advice and networking sessions. Fellowship events for research staff and students, such as those run in the Chemistry Department at York support ECRs in applying for funded fellowships, as this can be one way of securing academic posts. The opportunity to gain teaching experience to boost CVs is also important at this career stage and allows researchers to assess whether an academic career is suited to them. The Chemistry Department, Edinburgh, gives all interested post-docs the opportunity to gain experience in teaching. The Chemistry Department, York, has introduced a formal named researcher and direct appointment procedure to tackle gender inequalities after finding that named researcher or direct appointments were previously subject to gender bias (meaning men researchers were more likely to be named in research bids or offered a direct appointment than women researchers), a trend also found in research by Van Den Brink and Benschop (2012).

An increase in the number of women researchers means that there is a larger recruitment pool for the next stage; therefore, activities aimed at ECRs often include PhD students as well. Departments arrange talks for potential research staff about academic careers and offer opportunities for developing research experience during post-graduate study. Psychology at QUB also holds a summer research internship system for second-year students to gain research experience, and most students securing these positions so far have been women. Physics at Cambridge holds a series of support workshops for undergraduates, in particular targeted at women, to provide information and guidance on post-graduate research. The need for a holistic view of transitions in the early stages of academic careers have been recognised by the Department of Chemistry at ICL which formed the Early Career Development Committee to support all ECRs including those in the final stages of PhD study through to early career lecturers.



### 3.3 Activities Aimed at Mid-Career Academics, Senior Academics and Management

Activities that focus on mid-senior academics were emphasised less in the documentation analysed. For women at these levels the main objectives are to support promotions, increasing the number of women candidates for professorial positions, and increasing the representation of women in senior management roles. In terms of data analysis some institutions are now looking at ‘residency time’ at different career stages to try to understand where possible career delays might occur: for example, assessing whether women spend more time at senior lecturer level than men before moving to the next step might suggest the need for further research on why this occurs and the development of initiatives to assist the transition. Actions to address the gender pay gap, which is shown to widen as a career develops (Dias et al. 2016), is not a common objective; the Department of Chemistry, University of York, is rare in its approach of analysing and publishing gender pay gap data for full professors.<sup>6</sup>

Gender equality work relating to promotions can be considered as three interlinking activities: (1) establishing clarity and transparency of promotions procedures and criteria; (2) supporting the development of skills and achievements in line with requirements for progression; and (3) active encouragement of eligible women to apply for promotion. An initiative developed by the Department of Chemistry, University of York, makes promotions procedures and criteria more transparent by holding an annual promotion seminar, where the achievements of previously promoted staff are anonymised and published. In order to meet the second stage of supporting the development of skills and achievements in line with requirements for progression, departments have focused on leadership skills development, support for grant applications, increasing networking opportunities and ensuring representation of women on committees. Finally, in order to increase the numbers of

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<sup>6</sup> In 2016, the University of Essex allocated one-off pay increases to women professors in an attempt to effectively close the professorial gender pay gap in that institution.

women at mid-career and senior levels in academia, Gold Award departments have encouraged eligible academics to gain promotion-relevant experience and to apply for promotion. Established appraisal processes are often utilised for this purpose. In the Department of Biology, University of York, discussion of promotion readiness forms an integral part of the annual staff performance review. In addition, an annual email from the Head of Department (HoD) invites staff to discuss their CV and career stage. The HoD and the Chair of the Department's Research Committee then identify those who are at an appropriate stage for promotion, and encourage them to apply. In the Athena SWAN submission document they state that this is intended to overcome the greater reluctance of women to consider themselves ready to apply for promotion. Similarly, at the School of Psychology, QUB, directors of research discuss potential future committee/administrative roles with staff during appraisal in an attempt to identify whether there are particular roles that a staff member could benefit from taking up, thinking ahead with regard to future applications for promotion. The directors of research feed these discussions to the Management Committee when decisions are being taken about allocation of roles so that staff can be offered positions that would advantage their career progression.

## 4 Athena SWAN Impact and 'Gold Leadership'

The Gold Award department activities analysed suggest that the ingredients of success include a willingness to embrace the remit of Athena SWAN in all aspects of the department, in respect of all career stages and by staff at all levels. The initiatives in themselves in most cases do not appear to be radically different from those reported by silver award holding departments, nor does gender data for these departments tell an uncompromisingly positive story. Data on representation of women at different career stages in Gold Award departments show some changes over the course of their engagement with Athena SWAN<sup>7</sup>: between 2007 and 2014

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<sup>7</sup>The small numbers associated with percentage increases and decreases at department level should be taken into account in considering these trends.

the percentage of senior lecturers who are women in the Department of Chemistry, York, has increased from 12 to 33%. At Psychology QUB, 15% of those at mid-career were women in 2010; this had increased to 25% in 2013. These successes tell only part of the story as often these trends can be accompanied by decreases in the percentage of lecturers or professors who are women. The Department of Chemistry, Edinburgh saw their percentage of professors who are women increase from 15% in 2007 to 27% in 2014, demonstrating increases over and above sector averages. Data published by the ECU show that between 2010 and 2014 there have been increases nationally in the percentage of women professors (19–22%): professors in science, engineering and technology (SET) (15–18%) and non-SET professors (25–44%).

In addition to an increase in the representation of women at different career stages, there is also evidence of long-standing commitment to gender equality led from the top. The two institutions with two gold awards – York and QUB – have been involved in Athena SWAN since the beginning. The first department to achieve gold was the Department of Chemistry, University of York. QUB is a founding signatory of the Athena SWAN Charter, holds an institutional silver award and is reported by the ECU to have fully engaged with Athena SWAN (Ruebain 2015). Similarly, in other Gold Award department institutions there are strong links to Athena SWAN: Professor Athene Donald, former Chair of the Athena Forum, is a member of the Physics Department at Cambridge's SAT. Strong leadership that expresses clear commitment to gender equality appears to be a key factor in these departments' success. In correspondence with the ECU in which questions were asked about what sets Gold Award department apart, they state that:

Gold Award departments are characterised by leadership with a strong vision for equality and diversity, a desire to challenge the status quo and recognition that organisational culture is key. For gold departments, actions at the more basic end of the spectrum are mainstreamed and standard practice. Gold departments take ownership and don't seek to defer responsibility to others or 'the system'. Not everything they do may appear innovative, but they have generally been early adopters of practices that are becoming more standard across the sector.

The ECU also uses the term ‘Gold leadership’ and the importance of this for success. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that recognition of gender equality work in the HE sector through the Athena SWAN charter is about fully incorporating gender equality into normal business (mainstreaming), tailored initiatives in response to issues raised through quantitative and qualitative data analysis, and strong leadership driving forward the gender agenda.

## **5 Reflections on Engaging with Athena SWAN: A Case Study**

As evident from the analysis of activities of Gold Award holding departments, engaging with Athena SWAN is an involved and complex process. This section will describe perceptions of the overall approach promoted by Athena SWAN, resource and leadership factors and assessment of what have been successful initiatives to promote gender equality in a case study university (CSU).

The CSU started life as a technical college, achieving university status in the 1960s and continues to emphasise engineering in terms of its academic activity. Student data for 2013–2014 show that there were approximately 16,000 students, just over a third of these were women. Staff data for 2015 show that there were approximately 850 academic (research and teaching and teaching only) and 360 research staff in the institution. The proportion of female academic staff is increasing: in 2016, 30% of academic staff were women, compared with 17% in 2007. A slower change has occurred at professorial level in the CSU: in 2016, 17% of full professors were women, compared with 15% in 2008, which is below the 22% of professors who are women across all UK HEIs in 2013–2014 (up from 15% in 2003–2004). The university has also appointed a number of women to senior positions in recent years – two-thirds of the pro vice-chancellors are women.

This analysis is based on a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with five key informants (three men and two women) engaged in Athena SWAN or with significant HR responsibilities at senior management level. The interviews provide an insight into how senior management and those

active in engaging with Athena SWAN have experienced this process, in terms of equality work and the application process.

## 5.1 Experiences of Using Athena SWAN to Tackle Gender Inequality

During the interviews questions were asked about views on the general approach that Athena SWAN promotes and more specific questions about experiences of tackling gender inequality. The need for action is the cornerstone of the Athena SWAN approach. Reflecting on this, one interviewee talked about the different positions it is possible to take on gender equality in society: that of a passive ‘absence of interference’ through to active promotion of opportunities and removal of obstacles – ‘an active way of driving equality, rather than just treating everybody the same’ (Interview 2). The interviewee then highlighted how Athena SWAN challenges a passive approach to gender equality. Interviewee 1 accepts that Athena SWAN has been successful in raising the issue to the extent that engagement in gender issues is normalised across the sector.

The specific methods promoted by Athena SWAN – monitoring of data linked to the development of actions plans – are considered good principles to base action on gender equality in HE institutions. Interviewees (4 and 5) talked about the way this approach improves transparency and tries to make the invisible visible and how data collection and monitoring is crucial. The methodological framework that foregrounds data analysis and evidence-based action is, as one interviewee (3) remarked, a framework that allows for difference as it is applied across varying institutional contexts, for example at department level.

## 5.2 Leadership and Gender Equality Champions

The ECU recognises the huge commitment of resources and staff time in engaging with Athena SWAN (Ruebain 2015); therefore it is unsurprising this issue was significant in interviews. Access to resources and the ability to secure extra resources was considered by Interviewee 3 to be related to seniority, indicating that those in senior management find it

easier to secure support and resources for work around gender equality: ‘that really helps as they’re the ones who can get buy-in from academics and Deans. They can support the academics, push for central resources. You can see how that person has more clout’. As with Gold Award departments, leadership is argued to be key (Interview 2) not only in the SATs but also in the departments more broadly; for example, one previous school Associate Dean for Research had a background in researching gender issues and is a strong advocate of gender equality, so was thought to be particularly effective in leading initiatives for gender equality (Interview 5). The enthusiasm or reticence of those in senior positions across the university is key to how far Athena SWAN can make an impact. Changes in heads of department, for example, can make a massive difference to those trying to implement gender equality actions (Interviews 3, 4 and 5).

### 5.3 Gender Equality Successes

It was clear in the interviews that there is a sense that the CSU has made some progress over recent years with regard to organisational culture and gender equality. Interviewees talked about the University being more progressive than other institutions, and becoming increasingly more so over time (Interview 2). Engagement with Athena SWAN has resulted in standardised monitoring of data at institutional and departmental level that is supported centrally by dedicated staff. Systematic data analysis was considered ‘a significant step forward’ by Interviewee 1, and is a crucial part of submitting an application to the ECU for an award. Interviewees were asked about what they perceive to be successful initiatives to promote gender equality in the institution. These include the standardisation of core hours for meetings (10:00–16:00), breast-feeding space being normalised in new developments and refurbishment of buildings on campus, policies and practices to support flexible working and a mentoring programme based on a sponsorship model. Three of the initiatives highlighted broadly relate to family-friendly work policies – with the view to supporting women (and men) as they negotiate work and family life – which do not substantially tackle gender

and power issues at an organisational level. However, the Sponsorship-Mentoring Programme is trying to tackle gender inequality through recognition of the importance of active support when developing academics' careers at ECR and mid-career level.

Overall, there is a sense of a 'work in progress' and that there is more to come in engaging with Athena SWAN at a departmental and institutional level. One interviewee, when talking about their vision for gender equality in the institution, highlighted the need for a consistent message to be 'pushed loud and clear across the whole institution' (Interview 1), which may be possible as more departments prepare submissions for Athena SWAN awards.

## 6 Athena SWAN as a Catalyst for Gender Equality?

The analysis of Gold Award departments and the experiences of those in the CSU indicate that engagement in Athena SWAN has an impact on how institutions recognise and take responsibility for gender inequality in their institutions. The overriding success of Athena SWAN is in relation to promoting commitment to gender equality across the sector, particularly (up to now) in STEMM disciplines. The impact of increased commitment of HEIs to gender equality is more difficult to identify. The ECU defines the advancement in gender equality as being specifically related to: representation, progression of students into academia, the journey through career milestones and the working environment for all staff (ECU). Burkinshaw (2015, p. 54) maintains that representation of women and attaining critical mass is key 'without this change is not possible'. Other research on diversity of boards has suggested that without representation it is difficult to ensure an environment in which women can thrive (Cook and Glass 2015). The concept of ensuring representation underpins many of the objectives that institutions undertake in relation to gender equality, but this is only part of the story, as the experiences of women (who may be in a minority) and how they advance careers in academia is also important. However, the differences that Athena SWAN may make to the experiences of women academics

can only be uncovered qualitatively. In the CSU there is the view that Athena SWAN has accelerated changes that were already occurring (Interview 1). Beer (2015, p. 42) argues that 'these programmes are catalysts for change. They encourage HEIs, research institutes and other organisations to transform their cultures and make a real difference to the lives of staff and students'. Further, an evaluation found that Athena SWAN was having a positive impact on female careers in STEMM subjects in terms of career satisfaction, opportunities for training and development, knowledge of promotion processes and fairness in the allocation of workloads (Munir et al. 2013). Moreover, the success of Athena SWAN forms an important context for the success of other nation-wide programmes aimed at increasing representation of women, for example, the 'Aurora' women-only leadership programme (see Barnard et al. 2016).

There are, however, some limitations of Athena SWAN to consider. Using the ECU's own definition of success, the impact of the scheme may be much more limited than implied in this analysis. Research by Gregory-Smith (2015, p. 1) assessing the impact of Athena SWAN on medical schools in the UK found that 'tying funding to Athena SWAN silver status has yet to have an impact on female careers, although medical schools have invested in efforts to achieve silver status'. Furthermore, Athena SWAN could be considered counter-productive; Caffrey et al. (2016) raise a crucial issue about the gendered division of 'Athena SWAN labour' in their study in academic medicine in which they found that women staff took on a disproportionate amount of the work involved, potentially limiting the career advancement of those women. The question of consequences is an important one; however, research on the impact of gender equality initiatives in other contexts points to the difficulties in achieving identifiable quantitative successes (see Johnson et al. 2015; Klein 2015). The data on the Gold Award department's representation of women indicates 'mixed progress', due to small numbers and to the nature of what happens in departments as academic staff are appointed or leave the institution. National data does show some increases in the representation of women in SET and non-SET disciplines, though it is difficult to attribute this to the work of Athena SWAN as the largest increases have been in non-SET disciplines



that had (until the expansion of the Charter in 2015) been mostly excluded from the scheme.<sup>8</sup>

Another limitation of the Athena SWAN approach found in the mapping of the Gold Award departments is that there is less emphasis on mid-career and senior academics or at management level, than would otherwise be expected. The focus appears to be on ECRs, which could be considered a weakness since it implicitly suggests a focus on ‘fixing’ the early career women. Even in initiatives aimed at mid-career and senior academics, the focus is on training women with the right skills or encouraging them to put themselves forward for promotion. Some initiatives that support the situation that many women find themselves in – balancing family and work – also reinforce gender stereotypes about the role of women in the domestic sphere. This has already been recognised in an important critique of women in science discourse and equality initiatives that re-inscribe feminine difference (Garforth and Kerr 2009). Actions that align with gender stereotypes – the idea of women as carers – are likely to be accepted and supported, while radical change is sidestepped. This is important, as Johnson et al. (2015) suggest that to achieve success new initiatives must ‘translate easily into practice and have leadership support’ (Johnson et al. 2015, p. 689), which together may result in only modest impacts on gender inequality across the sector. Critics suggest that initiatives like Athena SWAN actively reproduce existing power structures (Garforth and Kerr 2009). Similarly, Teelken and Deem (2013, p. 520) argue that new governance approaches in HE reiterate the status quo, allowing inequality to continue unchallenged beneath a ‘vener of equality’. The conclusion of the analysis presented here, in line with other studies on the Athena SWAN Charter (Caffrey et al. 2016; Gregory-Smith 2015; Munir et al. 2013), suggests that a longitudinal qualitative and quantitative assessment is necessary to assess the full impact of Athena SWAN on gender equality. In the meantime, it is evident that it has been successful in increasing commitment to gender equality in Gold Award departments and in those institutions applying for Athena SWAN awards.

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<sup>8</sup> Exceptions are mathematics and medicine.

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