

Embedding Inclusive Gender Equality in an Academic Institution Over Time: A Case Study

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Abstract: This case study outlines and explores how we have leveraged a gender equality charter framework (Athena Swan) to progress and sustain culture and organisational change within a university context in Ireland. Addressing and progressing gender equality (GE) in higher education institutions (HEIs) and research performing organisations has been a focus at European Commission and Union levels and manifests through a range of reports, research funding eligibility requirements and awards. At a national or European Union Member State level a range of stimulants and requirements have been instigated to further develop this agenda, and state targets have been put in place that all Irish HEIs must meet, including, for example, a target of 40% female full professors by 2024, gender balance on key decision-making committees, and obligations to report annually on our Gender Pay Gap. This case study on Trinity College Dublin, an inaugural European Commission Sustainable Gender Equality Award recipient (2023) and an Athena Swan Institutional Silver Award holder (2023), outlines the experiences, results, challenges and impacts of implementing our Gender Equality Plan (GEP) at both institutional level and across our distributed university (3 Faculties, 24 Schools, and across all professional services). It adopts a national and European policy into practice approach where the macro-level drivers are unpacked at local/university level to clarify the operationalisation approach required and implemented and the subsequent ramifications, both positive and negative. We emphasise how alignment of school-level Athena Swan work with institutional strategies is key to progress (e.g. moving from 12% female full professors in 2008 to 37% in 2024, and the election of the first female Provost and President in 2021). This is explored alongside the adoption of internal review processes to further support quality control, involving the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Office, Human Resources (HR) and external reviewers, as part of the charter award application process. We introduce the Trinity Athena Swan Champions Network, which serves as a critical peer learning and support source and a community of practice with multiplier effects across the university. In addition, intersectional considerations and changing legislative and funder requirements during this time have required dynamic and creative responses to addressing gender equality within the university.

Keywords: Gender Equality (GE), Academia, Culture Change, Organisational Change, Equality Charters, Gender Equality Plans (Geps).

1. Background

This case study explores the influence of European Union (EU), European Commission (EC), Irish national and other relevant policies and requirements on gender equality (GE) within an academic institution over a decade (2014-2024). A case study approach is adopted, allowing for a deeper understanding of real-life events and processes with purposeful intent. We note an acknowledged potential for subjective bias (Ndam, 2023). Our study outlines policy and funding contexts that have acted as stimulants to progressing GE and examines the impacts and challenges over time. It utilises a policy into practice lens where the macro-level policy and compliance frameworks are illustrated by activities and actions at local, or micro level, within the university context to connect both realms and showcase practical examples of policy into practice progress over time. The operationalisation of measures through the utilisation of a national/international GE charter framework are examined alongside consideration of how charter revisions in 2021 required re-orientation and expansion of the work at an institutional and national level. The utilisation of institutional and research funding eligibility through adherence to and attainment of charter related awards are reviewed, and we describe the impacts, changes and ongoing efforts in this process. Based in a highly competitive organisational environment which relies on international rankings, securing competitive research funding streams, and ensuring research impact, in addition to attracting and teaching students, we consider how we approach the goals of sustaining GE initiatives and embed them in practice. Future goals and intentions for an expanded and intersectional approach to GE are also presented. Finally, maintenance, continuous improvement, and expansion efforts must be resourced, recognised and valued. We outline how this is addressed currently and explore how this may develop, alongside other areas requiring research, financial support and attention. The limitations of this case study are articulated, including the context of the study (a university setting), potential for self-reporting bias and the resource limitations with the Irish public higher education (HE) sector.

2. Changing Policy in Ireland

The national HE policy terrain in relation to GE, with related targets and annual reporting to the state funding body, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), has shifted exponentially since 2014. The seminal HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutes (2016), presented a vision and rationale for intensive efforts to accelerate GE in HEIs alongside recommendations and targets. The Review (*ibid.*) utilised a literature review, including grey literature, and an analysis of academic staff data disaggregated by gender, pay grade, contract type and discipline. The findings pointed to stark endemic inequalities in relation to GE in the sector and recommended substantial activities and actions to rectify this. The Review strongly positioned gender action plans as a key component of work towards GE and introduced the requirement for HEIs to achieve an Athena Swan institutional award by 2019 (*ibid.*).

The UK Athena Swan Charter's original aim was to promote and support GE for women in academia, with an initial focus on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematic (STEM) areas. This subsequently expanded to all faculties and subject areas, opening up to include professional, research and support staff working in HE settings. In 2015, prior to the Review, the Athena Swan Charter had been launched in Ireland as a pilot project for three years, but now the expectation was that HEIs would adopt the Charter principles and apply for awards (Drew & Canavan, 2021). To strongly incentivise this, Irish state research funding agencies were recommended to seek Athena Swan award acquisition as a requirement for research funding grants: this was confirmed as a requirement in the subsequent National Gender Action Plan 2018-2020: Accelerating Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEA, 2018). Within three years, the landscape for HEIs in relation to advancing GE had substantially shifted, GE was now firmly on the agenda of the Irish state funding agencies, the Department of Education and the HEI sector.

The HEA commissioned a second review in 2022, which notes that Athena Swan is now embedded within the Irish HEI sector and recommended continuation of this approach. It also notes the revised Charter for Ireland has a broader EDI scope, and new annual reporting requirements on related EDI work that HEIs provide to the HEA. The success of the Athena Swan Charter in Ireland was linked to the requirement to hold an Athena Swan award in order to be eligible for research funding by the key Irish state funders including the Environmental Protection Agency, Health Research Board, the Irish Research Council, and Science Foundation Ireland since early 2020 (HEA, 2022).

3. Developments and Compliance Changes

Whilst the HEI and GE landscape was changing in Ireland, additional changes were also contemporaneously in development at European Union (EU) and Commission (EC) levels. As a result, the adaptations occurring in Ireland as outlined above, aligned with similar requirements emerging in relation to EC Horizon Europe research funding. From 2022, the EC implemented a requirement to have a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) in place prior to applying for Horizon Europe funding. This approach was designed to accelerate structural change. This eligibility condition entered into force in 2022, following a 12-month period of outreach, promotion and training from the EC (EC, 2024). There are four mandatory requirements and five recommended areas that a GEP must contain - these have supported movement towards a pan-European shared understanding of a GEP and has allowed for comparability between HEIs and research performing organisations (RPOs). The four mandatory GEP components are: (1) must be a public document; (2) have dedicated resources; (3) incorporate data collection and monitoring; and (4) be supported by training and capacity-building within the institution (EC, 2022). Concern around maintaining access to the EU's key multi-annual funding programme for research and innovation valued at over €94 Billion, or, being deemed ineligible or non-competitive in research funding applications, provided additional impetus to GE work in HEIs.

The 2021 review of the Athena Swan Charter incorporated these EC requirements and as a result, achievement of an Athena Swan award and the publication of an accompanying gender action plan by research performing institutes (RPOs) serves as a proxy indication of GEP compliance and Horizon Europe eligibility. In Ireland, we could, therefore, draw on a preexisting framework, national support mechanisms including peer learning networks, advice from the Athena Swan Ireland Office as well as workshops and webinars to support GEP development and Horizon Europe GEP compliance.

In recent years the Council of the European Union's rotating Presidency holders have also addressed GE issues in the research and HE settings with a series of Declarations providing attention and future direction for EU member states. These include the Ljubljana Declaration with a focus on mainstreaming GE across research and

innovation arising from the Slovenia Presidency (2021); the Prague Call for Action addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in HE and research from the Czech Republic Presidency (2022), and the Spanish Presidency (2023) which highlighted GBV in academic and research settings through a range of conferences and events (UniSAFE, 2023).

In Ireland, legislative changes and compliance requirements include an emphasis on reporting on the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights duty to the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission. Since 2021, workplaces are legally obliged to publish an annual gender pay gap report for the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Annual reporting to Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) on numbers of and supports for staff with disabilities continues as required by the 2005 Disability Act. A substantial new piece of legislation, the Higher Education Authority Act 2022, outlines how each HEI must have an equality statement and the policy of the institution relating to equality, will include GE in all activities of the institution (Irish Statute Book). The HEA launched their revised Principles of Good Practice in Research within Irish Higher Education Institutions in 2022, considering many of the recent changes to the Irish research landscape. The revised Principles included 'Gender Equality and Inclusiveness' for the first time, and HEIs and RPOs in Ireland are expected to adhere to these Principles to promote good practice in research conduct (HEA, 2022). Further, since late 2023, all HEIs are required to commit to anti-racism principles and develop an institutional action plan to address race and ethnic equality. These combined legal and policy changes have expanded the scope, reporting, and compliance requirements within a relatively short space of time. Additionally, EU requirements embed a focus on inclusive GE emphasising intersectional considerations, which we in Trinity aim to incorporate into our institutional EDI work through mixed methods data collection, cross-tabulation of relevant data where numbers allow to ensure confidentiality is maintained and reflecting on the differences between our Schools and Faculties where a range of intersectional considerations can give rise to specific local level actions and interventions.

Against the backdrop of these substantial changes, the Covid-19 pandemic had significant additional implications for the HEI sector. The Coimbra Group noted that several gendered impacts due to the pandemic on research. Increased caring responsibilities, disproportionality experienced by female staff, had knock on effects on publication outputs and research grant applications (2021). The closure of archives, libraries and laboratories also impacted HEI staff and had a particular impact on women and early career researchers. Many HEI or workplace responses to the pandemic did not incorporate a gender aware viewpoint (EC, 2023). However, some outcomes in work practice changes, including remote or blended working, online conferences and meetings, etc. have been positive and may support work-life balance over time, many of which have been transposed into Trinity HR policies and work practices (ibid.).

4. Charter Award Attainment and Progress to Date in Trinity

Trinity was one of the first HEIs in Ireland to attain an Athena Swan award and was an active advocate for bringing the charter and awards to Ireland in 2015, alongside the University of Limerick and University College Cork (McIlrath et al, in press). The initial Athena Swan awards process, piloted by the HEA, has since been mainstreamed. The revised 2021 Ireland Charter aimed to support HEIs at institutional and local (school, department, unit) levels in impactful and sustainable GE work and progress across the nine equality grounds enshrined in Irish legislation. Trinity continues to achieve Athena Swan awards. Today, Trinity holds an Institutional Silver award (awarded 2023). Four of our 24 Schools hold Silver awards; 15 hold Bronze awards. These awards are across all three College faculties. One professional unit, Global Engagement, secured a Bronze award in early 2024, becoming the first professional unit to achieve an Athena Swan award in Ireland.

Each Athena Swan award application is precipitated by an 18-24 month process and entails substantial data collection, analysis, consultation and preparation. Under the revised Charter, an award is granted for a five-year period and then an application can be submitted for renewal or progression to a higher tier award, all through a rigorous peer-reviewed application process. This 5-year cycle provides a realistic time frame to demonstrate progress and impact in a sustainable manner. There are three levels of Athena Swan awards; Bronze which identifies challenges revealed through a robust self-assessment and outlines activities and actions to address these challenges. A Silver award is granted, usually after two successive Bronze awards, and based on a record of ongoing sustained activity relevant to the Charter and clear evidence of impact in relation to the action plan or GEP. A Gold level award (not yet achieved in the Republic of Ireland), requires a significant record of activity and impact in relation to GE and requires a HEI to act as a leader and as a beacon to others.

Trinity was awarded an institutional Bronze award and three Bronze awards (Schools of Chemistry, Physics and Natural Sciences) in 2015. Much of the support for these applications was driven by an EC Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) research grant to the INTEGER Project, led in Trinity by Professor Eileen Drew of WiSER (Centre for Women in Science and Engineering Research). WiSER became the Trinity Centre for Gender Equality and Leadership (TCGEL) in 2017 and leveraged a second Horizon 2020 grant for the SAGE project, which also supported Athena Swan work.

The University Athena Swan Committee (UASC) is responsible for overseeing Trinity's Athena Swan objectives, alongside oversight of the implementation of our institutional action plan. The UASC meets approximately four times per academic year. Membership includes EDI Office staff, the Head of Human Resources (HR), Faculty Deans, and representation from other key decision making and compliance offices across Trinity in addition to student representation.

By 2019, Trinity had secured an institutional Bronze award and increased the number of Schools holding Bronze awards to seven, including three in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. The changes required by the 2016 HEA Gender Equality Review precipitated new Vice President of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (VPEDI) roles in Irish HEIs. With an initial appointment to this (then part-time) role in Trinity in 2019, an EDI Office was established, subsequently Athena Swan work migrated from TCGEL to the EDI Office, thus mainstreaming the activity. Given the scope, volume and growth in work related to Athena Swan maintenance and development within Trinity, a specialist EDI Data Analyst and Athena Swan Officer was appointed in autumn 2020. In addition to a changed and expanded Athena Swan Charter in 2021, Trinity elected its first female Provost and President since the foundation of the University in 1592 by Queen Elizabeth I. The new Provost reconfigured the VPEDI role to a full-time seconded post and publicly endorsed the new Athena Swan Ireland principles in late 2021.

In 2022, Trinity was named an inaugural EU Sustainable Gender Equality Champion Award, following from a competitive process. The award was presented by then Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth at a ceremony for Gender Equality Champions at the European Commission on 8 March 2023, International Women's Day. This recognised Trinity's demonstration of significant, sustained activity and achievement through the implementation of a GEP over time. The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in Ireland congratulated award winners, commenting on the inspirational achievements of the winning universities, three of four of which were Irish HEIs. Securing this award drew attention within and beyond Trinity to the enormous efforts and progress in relation to GE, much through the Athena Swan Charter and awards processes, and galvanised the EDI Office and UASC to progress and submit a successful silver level institutional Athena Swan application some months later.

5. Research and Activity to Support Award Attainment in Trinity

The self-assessment process to gather and generate data for an Athena Swan award application is substantial. For each application, data across three years regarding staff and students is required, drawn from data collected by HR and Academic Registry units. A mixed methods approach is leveraged, drawing on all-staff confidential surveys which provides feedback from staff. The survey is subject to research ethics committee approval entailing sign-off from the Trinity Data Protection Officer. It is disseminated online, promoted during a one-month period to encourage participation. Paper copies are also available for staff on request. The first Athena Swan staff survey circulated to academic staff only garnered a 12% response rate in 2015. In 2020 this survey shared with all staff and achieved a 26% response rate. The 2022 Athena Swan EDI survey secured a 33% response rate; in 2024, 36% rate was achieved. It is important to note that staff numbers grew during this period. The survey focusses on key areas including career progression, workplace culture, bullying and harassment and experiences and perceptions of the working environment. Data from the survey, once cleaned and reviewed to ensure response rates are sufficient to preserve confidentiality, can be utilised for School level Athena Swan applications and compared with overall institutional data, facilitating opportunities to flag areas requiring attention and progress made.

Additional data for the 2023 Athena Swan application came from a HR all-staff wellbeing survey which explored attitudes and experiences in relation to post Covid-19 pandemic experiences. A series of consultations in relation to race and ethnic equality with staff and students provided qualitative findings we could draw on. Other data we drew on included an examination of female research grant applications and success rates (Trinity Research Office) and a comprehensive review of art within Trinity by gender of artist and sitter for portraits dating back to the foundation of the College in 1592. Gender Pay Gap data, provided by HR was also included. External

benchmarking data from the HEA and other sources assist in contextualising Trinity data and in setting realistic targets within our action plan. Attention to enhancing and supporting staff diversity data, particularly in relation to age, ethnicity and disability to better understand how we can support career progression through an intersectional lens across the career life-course has commenced. However, progress is slow in relation to building trust in data collection systems to improve disclosure/sharing rates – a sectoral challenge. In relation to analysis of institutional survey data differential rates of disclosures of negative workplace experiences are higher when individual equality grounds are incorporated into analysis, providing an imperative for intersectional considerations to be built into both prevention and response mechanisms.

Since 2023, prior to any Athena Swan submission from Trinity, a comprehensive phased review of each application is undertaken co-ordinated by the EDI Data Analyst and Athena Swan Officer and involves EDI Office staff, Head of HR and other senior HR staff and the Associate Vice Provost for EDI. This process assists with quality control and supports alignment with the Trinity institutional GEP. This ensures a coherent and complementary approach to GE and EDI work across College and adherence to equality and employment legislation and requirements. Additionally, we draw on external expert peer reviews. At institutional level the UASC provides oversight on application content and action plan development and implementation, including selection of priority actions. EDI and HR work very closely together to develop actions to achieve HEA targets, and we collaborate on the work needed to achieve targets. Of note is the range of approaches to support increasing the number of female full professors from 12% in 2008 to 37% in 2024 (note the current benchmark for this in HEIs in Ireland is 32%). This required multi-faceted and novel approaches to advance towards the 40% HEA target for Irish HEIs.

At School/Unit level, Athena Swan work is led by Champions and overseen by a local Self-Assessment Team (SAT). In addition to the supports the EDI Office supports provided, a unique Athena Swan Champions Network exists in Trinity, established in 2019. This Network meets monthly comprising Athena Swan Champions from each School/Unit engaged in the Athena Swan process. It provides a communication channel between Schools/Units, the UASC, and EDI Office. It acts as a peer-support network for those working on and advancing GE across Trinity and embedding Athena Swan principals at local level. Importantly, the Chair of the Network is a member of the UASC ensuring regular feedback opportunities. The Network also allows for good practices and local level actions to be shared and multiplied for greater traction and progress across Trinity.

6. Recognition, Visibility and Reward for Gender Equality Work

The Athena Swan Charter requires HEI leadership to commit publicly to a number of principles including:

“Principle 1: adopting robust, transparent, and accountable processes for Athena Swan work, including..... . distributing tasks appropriately, formally recognising and rewarding work and ensuring there is not a disproportionate burden on underrepresented groups.”(Advance HE, 2021)

However, there are challenges for this aspect of the work noted particularly by the EC and Royal Irish Academy (RIA) and articulated as a sectoral issue during the first National Equality Charter Symposium hosted by Trinity (Sy et al, 2023). The EC notes that there are insufficient human and financial resources to develop and progress GEPs within organisations, with often substantial bureaucratic challenges to be overcome. Women primarily lead this important work within HEIs and RPOs which can lead to negative consequences in relation to research and academic work, something observed in Trinity, and an issue also noted by the EC (EC, 2024). A RIA report stated that the Athena Swan processes are time-consuming and much of this work is not taken into account by HEI leaders and may lead to staff providing time above and beyond their roles to ensure institutional GEP compliance (2021). The EC is planning increased monitoring and GEP compliance checks, which could include sanctions or research funding withdrawal as potential outcomes, and this could act as an incentive for greater attention to supporting and rewarding GE and EDI work.

7. In Conclusion

This case study has presented and discussed a range of influential drivers for GE, and more broadly, equality focussed work within and beyond a leading Irish university. There are potential inherent biases and limitations to this case study given the context of self-reporting inherent to the processes described above. This includes reports to external funders and award review panels as part of the Irish and EU policy approaches to GE and EDI in the HEI and RPO contexts, as outlined above.

We outlined the Irish national context, where specific stimulants and activators to prime attention to GE have been introduced. We also looked at the range of rewards and sanctions for this work and related achievements at national and EU levels. Catalysts at EU level have amplified ongoing work in Ireland and created specific European research funding eligibility requirements which have synergised with state efforts. This has led to significant advancements and progress across a relatively short time frame demonstrating the impact of connecting funding eligibility to GE activity and progress.

However, the burden of this work tends to land on women and sustaining it will require continued attention to ensure it does not re-amplify or expand existing inequalities. Intersectional GE approaches are emergent and will require capacity building and consideration (EC, 2024; Sy et al, 2023). Specific attention is required to ensure that unequal expectations around driving and implementing intersectional EDI work does not become the burden of those with intersectional life experiences – equitable distribution of, and responsibility for, undertaking the work of systemic change is required (Kangataran et al, in press; McCarthy et al, in press). Finally, GE and EDI work needs ongoing resourcing, sustained support and celebration of achievements: the work is inherently iterative. Given the fiscal constraints within the Irish publicly funded HE sector (Irish Universities Association (2024), DFHEIRS (2022)) doing this vital work within an over-stretched fiscal environment inhibits the potential for fully embedded sustained systemic change in universities. Attention to these concerns are required to ensure continued advancement, sufficient resourcing and to avoid retrograde developments.

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