

Transforming Gender Equality and Inclusion in Higher Education in Ireland

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Abstract: Today, Ireland is recognised as a leader among European countries in advancing gender equality (GE) in higher education. The remarkable characteristic of this profile, though, is the speed at which the higher education (HE) sector has embedded GE as a distinctive and integral feature of the system. Although there were efforts to advance gender equality in the Irish higher education sector, the importance of the topic did not take hold until 2015-2016. At that point, two events of enduring significance occurred. One was consensus in the higher education institutions (HEIs), supported by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), to adopt the Athena Swan framework for gender equality plans (GEPs). The other was publication by the HEA of an investigative report, with recommendations, by a committee led by former European Commissioner for Research and Innovation, Maire Geoghegan-Quinn. Little is known about advancing change across a higher education system in one country as a national priority. This paper explores the changes within the Irish HE landscape to unearth lessons learned and to address how Ireland as a case study, with government focus and support, has transformed the EDI agenda in the context of GE. The paper is based on, and draws from, a recent publication on this subject to which change leaders have contributed reflections to embed an EDI landscape. It discusses the methods by which collaboration on this book project was developed and supported, and the value of this reflective approach in making sense of the fast-paced change of the last decade. The paper highlights challenges and well as opportunities encountered along the way and briefly reflects on the maturation of the gender equality agenda in the current context.

Keywords: Gender Equality (GE), Higher Education, Ireland, Public Policy, Practice, Intersectionality

1. Introduction

Higher education (HE) in Ireland has transformed in the past thirty years. In 1991, women and men aged 15 and over had approximately equal graduation rates (14%), but by 2022, women's third level attainment, at 50%, exceeded that of men (46%) (CSO 2023). Accompanying this unprecedented student expansion was a growth in the HE workforce. Between 2011 and 2023, overall employment in the sector increased by 40% (HEA, 2012; HEA, 2024). The gender distribution of academic staff changed from being male dominated in 2013 (63% male: 37% female, CSO, 2013), to being more gender balanced in 2023 (53% male: 47% female, HEA 2023).

These data provide contextual background to the drivers for sectoral change (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1: Academic staff by grade, Universities, 2012 and 2022.

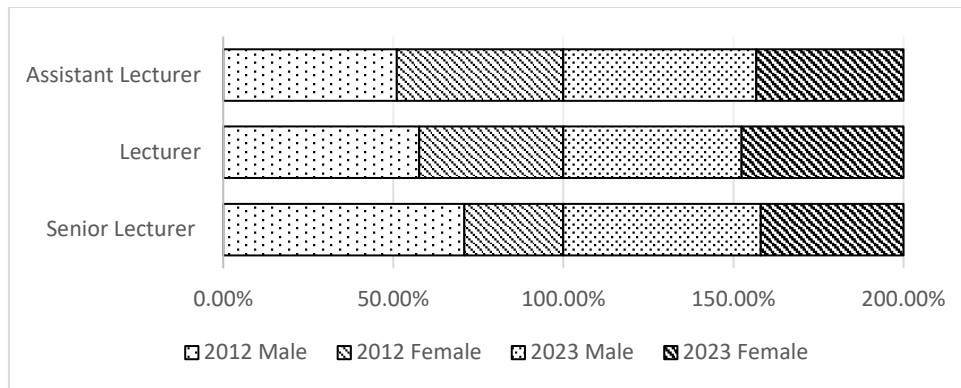


Figure 2: Academic staff by grade, Technological Universities and Institutes of Technology, 2012 and 2022

These charts demonstrate that women advanced in all academic categories across all higher education institutions (HEIs) in the decade. Women’s professorial post holding increased by 70% in the traditional universities, from a low of 19% in 2011-12 to 32.4% in 2023 (Figure 1). In the five newly created technological universities and two institutes of technology, where a different career structure operates, women’s share of Senior Lecturer posts (the highest grade) improved by 45%, from 29% in 2012 to 42% in 2022 (Figure 2).

Indeed, *She Figures 2021* recorded that the glass ceiling in Irish academia had decreased four points to 1.8 between 2015 and 2018, the largest improvement in the EU, attributed to the adoption by Irish HEIs of ‘cascade’ quota measures (European Commission, 2021: 192-194).

This progress over a decade was achieved through concerted action emanating from multiple sources and directions. Pressure for delivery of GE at professorial level was growing from 2009 onwards, as institutional disparities in promotion rates between women and men became obvious. Focus came on the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUI Galway), where one female academic who had failed to be promoted on successive occasions lodged a complaint of discrimination with the national labour tribunal, the Workplace Relations Commission. The case was heard in 2014, and it found in favour of the complainant, Michelle Sheehy-Skeffington (The Equality Tribunal, 2014). As part of its response, the NUI Galway Governing Body established a task force on GE in 2015 with a remit “To consider the University’s present gender mix among staff, including academic and support staff, and advise the University what measures it should take to develop effective gender equality”. The body was chaired by the distinguished academic, Professor Jane Grimson (Trinity College Dublin). The final report, published in 2016, detailed 24 recommendations for cultural, policy and procedural change, including the radical and potentially controversial one of introducing mandatory gender quotas based on a flexible cascade model for academic assessments and promotions (NUI Galway, 2016: 22).

The 2014 employment tribunal findings also had a national impact. As the sector regulator, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) established an independent expert group in 2015 chaired by former EU Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science, Maire Geoghegan-Quinn. The group was tasked to investigate and make recommendations for sectoral change. Their 2016 report provided a framework for GE. Recommendations included the introduction of the cascade quota model for academic promotions and the creation of an executive role to lead GE strategy, policy and initiatives in universities. Both measures were partially influenced by the NUI Galway Task Force Report recommendations.

At the time of the events in 2014-16 described above, three Irish universities were involved in European-funded projects leading to the development of gender equality plans (GEPs): The University of Limerick was a partner in FESTA, Trinity College Dublin was a partner in INTEGER, and University College Cork was involved in GENOVATE. This work, the first focused on developing local responses to institutional gender disadvantage, laid the groundwork for the adoption of Athena Swan as the institutional accreditation process for GE (O’Connor and Drew, 2023: 65). By April 2024, there were 131 Athena Swan award-holders in the sector, including four institutions with silver accreditation.

An additional incentive to deliver on GE arose when three key Irish research funding bodies announced that HEIs would be required to have Athena Swan accreditation by 2019 to be eligible for funding (O’Shea, 2016). This move mirrored the 2011 UK National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) announcement, which indicated that from 2016 onwards only institutions with an Athena Swan silver award would make the shortlist for NIHR funding

(Royal Society, 2016). These developments demonstrate the international diffusion of ideas and standards on GE, and the embedding of external GE-promoting frameworks into the Irish HE system.

Following early gains and as the extent of cultural change required of HEIs came to be understood, the delivery of GE slowed. To prompt action, Mary Mitchell-O'Connor, Minister of State for Higher Education, created a Gender Equality Task Force in 2017 and from its report published a two-year strategy and action plan focused on delivering the 2016 recommendations. This included a proposal to establish a HEA Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality to enable the sector to effect 'sustainable change by providing centralised support for the institutions, sharing of good practice, and funding for innovative organisational and cultural change initiatives nationally' (HEA, 2018: 2). The report also bolstered top-down efforts through integrating institutional target-setting for GE into the compacts agreed between the HEA and individual institutions, thereby making institutions accountable for progress. It also reinforced Athena Swan as the framework that all institutions were expected to adopt.

The GE Task Force Report identified where progress was unsatisfactorily slow – in women's share of full professorships (24% in 2017), and the almost complete domination by men of HE executive leadership. Further work in the Ministry of Education and the HEA led to the creation of a flagship female professorship programme, the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative (SALI). This competitive programme, launched in 2019, allocated 45 additional professorial posts (or equivalent leadership role) among HEIs, with salaries funded for ten years (HEA 2019a). Thirty posts have been allocated to end 2024, with an additional seven in reserve. The initiative had the desired effect. By 2023, women comprised 32% of full professors in Irish HEIs. In addition, the leadership of HE became more gender balanced. Eight women held the post of President in the 17 HE institutions in 2023 (47%), compared to four in 21 institutions in 2018 (19%) (HEA, 2023; HEA. 2019b: 6-10).

In March 2022, a progress review was commissioned by Simon Harris, Minister at the Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) which sought to make recommendations on how "higher education institutions might enhance their equality policies and their implementation to support gender equality" (O'Shea, 2022). This report recommended retaining the actions of the 2016 report and 2018 Gender Action Plan and adding two further areas – adoption of an intersectional approach to GE, and tackling sectoral precarious employment (HEA, 2022a). The universities report annually on progress to the HEA on the combined recommendations.

2. Bringing the Changemakers Together

The resulting book, *Transforming Gender Equality and Inclusion within Higher Education in Ireland – Contemporary Perspectives*, acknowledges these past injustices within Irish HE and focuses on the multifaceted set of actions and steps taken at policy and practice levels to assess and redress gender inequality and intersectional injustices. While Ireland serves as a national case study here, the content of this volume merits wider attention as institutions and organisations internationally focus on the advancement and mainstreaming of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). This section describes the developmental phases of the book project from conception to completion.

2.1 Conception

In early 2022, four EDI leaders in four Irish HEIs met to discuss EDI progress over the course of a decade in the sector. This culminated in their desire to document the challenging but positive changes in an academic publication that aimed to bring diverse EDI stakeholders through their lived experiences as policy makers, academics and practitioners embedding change. This vision stemmed from Stenhouse's (1981) belief that EDI-related knowledge be made public to inform other HEIs, organisations and sectors looking to redress inequalities. There was also a cognisance that policy and practice-led transformations within HE are rarely articulated through academic publications given the applied nature of this work. This publication represented an ideal opportunity for documenting and reflecting on the Irish change process.

Funding was secured from the HEA's Gender Equality Enhancement Fund (GEEF) in 2022 to bring together a cross-section of those working on issues related to Athena Swan, gender identity and stereotyping, gender inequality, EDI data gathering, intersectionality and gender-based violence, among others. The funding facilitated two writing retreats and the cost of an Open Access publication.

2.2 Community of Practice and Co-Creation

Through an inclusive community of practice approach, the volume and its contents emerged as a co-designed and co-authored publication. This methodology, informed by Wenger's community of practice theory, has been described as "groups of people informally bounded together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise" (Wenger and Snyder, 2000: 139-140). In addition, they typically "share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and [who] deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al, 2002: 4). It was also informed by a method of knowledge production that is characterised by transdisciplinary research clusters coming together to co-create knowledge from different sites and places and then put to practical use (Gibbons et al, 2005). These theoretical frameworks guided the project.

In December 2022, an open invitation was issued to all Irish HEIs inviting expressions of interest in joining the book project. Interested parties were asked to form thematic writing clusters creating cross and inter-institutional collaborations to provide more diverse insights into gender inequality and the complexity of embedding EDI. Broad thematic areas began to emerge ranging from gender inequality, sexual violence and harassment (SVH) to more intersectional issues relating to race equality, gender expression and identity, and inclusion. The 16 chapters and 5 vignettes selected for publication were written by 65 authors from 26 HEIs and other organisations including the HEA. Content emerged from their lived experiences as academics, policy makers, professionals and agents of change within HE in Ireland, and from their research. The authors have - and continue to be - active in enabling important transformational EDI change within HE in Ireland.

Social participation was central to the crafting of the book, to providing the space to reflect collectively, to share and co-create knowledge, and develop content. Two writing retreats across 2022/2023 were foundational spaces for social participation enabling successful writing clusters, and deepening knowledge and expertise in a collective environment. They facilitated face-to-face interaction and reflection on theory to practice, dimensions of EDI, and sectoral changes. This project evolved in a post-COVID environment and at a time in Ireland when many HEIs increased recruitment to EDI offices and units. The retreats helped develop solid working relationships after long periods of isolation. Collated chapter abstracts were shared with authors at each writing retreat to support a holistic sense of the book. An external facilitator supported development of a shared sense of the purpose and narrative design of the book.

2.3 Towards Completion

The final volume contains four themes that focus on pioneering change practices within the context of HE in Ireland. These align with the evolving sectoral EDI discourse and narrative over a ten-year period. The discourse commenced with an emphasis on GE/inequality. The focus of Section 1 - Contextualising Gender Equality within Irish Higher Education, offers lived experiences, pioneering efforts and outlines systemic challenges with a series of chapters that respond to how EDI was mainstreamed from the perspectives of high-profile women agents of change, policy makers and academics. Section 2 - Gender Transformations, Interventions, and Impact responds to Section 1, offering insights on how new policy initiatives, collaborative funding arrangements and GE frameworks have been enacted locally to advance and deepen equality underpinned by a reflective critique.

The national discourse then moved to wider aspects of inequality and discrimination related to gender-based violence and harassment within HE. Thus, Section 3 focuses on Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Higher Education, exploring the problematic landscape related to a national deficit of consent, disclosure, a prevalence of violence and discrimination and the exclusion of the LGBGT+ communities, with a focus on research and initiatives to educate and promote equality and inclusion. Section 4 - Gender and Intersectionality – focuses on recent wider intersectional challenges and the complexity of identity as it pertains to race, disability, gender and beyond. It considers aspects of inclusion/exclusion from the lived experience perspective with academic and student agents of change. The book was accepted by Palgrave as part of the Gender Equality and Education series.

2.4 What the Changemakers say

McIlrath et al (2025) synthesizing key insights from the chapters, identify several critical lessons. These include the necessity of *embedding EDI strategically at both national and institutional levels, targeting macro, meso, and micro spheres of influence, and ensuring institutional leadership assumes responsibility with transparency*. Progress requires courageous leadership that challenges entrenched norms and resources sufficient to support institutional objectives. Maher et al (2025) emphasize that strategic intent, supported by public legitimacy,

resources, and operational capacity, forms the foundation for addressing inequalities. Recent efforts integrate a gender lens while critically examining race and intersectionality, underscoring the importance of inclusive approaches. Addressing inequality requires acknowledging power dynamics and identifying the conceptual basis for equality in a critically reflective manner.

Changemakers note the *centrality of a data driven and evidence-based approach* as a crucial element in presenting the cases and challenges, firstly for tackling gender inequality in Irish HEIs, and secondly, in addressing the broadening and intersectional focus on inequality (Nestor, Reilly & Costelloe 2025). Systematic data collection and reporting fosters legitimacy, visibility, and transparency across institutions. This approach facilitates benchmarking, progress tracking, and the development of targeted responses informed by comprehensive quantitative and qualitative data. The HEA has played a key role in gathering and collating HEI staff and student data annually, illustrating patterns and trends within and across institutions (Rothwell and Woods, 2025; Cooke, Loftus and Maher, 2025). This has expanded to include surveys on SVH and race equality (HEA, 2016; 2021; 2022a; 2022b). Much of this work has had Ministerial oversight and engagement to support the agenda, strengthening the impetus within the policy arena at national level (Galligan, 2025; Rothwell and Woods, 2025). Linking research funding to the attainment of the Athena Swan Gender Equality Award exemplifies the *integration of data into policy*. Collaboration through structures like the Athena Swan National Intersectionality Working Group has broadened the focus to race inequality, further demonstrating the efficacy of data-driven approaches. However, gaps remain, such as the need for more robust datasets on ethnic diversity and annual diversity audits incorporating intersectionality. While some institutions have dedicated EDI data analysts, others rely on ad hoc arrangements, limiting capacity (Nestor, Reilly, and Costello, 2025).

The development of *clear national policies*, led by the HEA and DFHERIS, has been instrumental in advancing GE and the broader EDI agenda, facilitating significant change (O'Connor and Irvine, 2025). Policy pillars on gender, SVH, race, and equity of access provide a framework for institutional EDI strategies, with accountability reinforced through annual reporting to the HEA. These reports include governance statements, performance agreements, and detailed staff profiles alongside new EDI progress reports. Much of this data is aggregated by the HEA with cross-sectoral reporting, allowing for shared insights and measurement of progress at the macro level while continuing to impact on the policy landscape. The collective approach to EDI engages multiple actors, including staff and students, as agents of change. This dynamic partnership integrates voices at all levels, fostering a culture of shared accountability and continuous progress.

Governance structures at macro and meso levels bring together key stakeholders, supported by grassroots efforts at the micro level, into *integrated partnerships*. Accordingly, these interconnected layers collectively foster and shape national strategy. While it may appear that this is intentionally hierarchical, changemakers acknowledge fluidity between these different levels, allowing for some diffusion of power, particularly in enabling collective and individual agency supported by collaboration, consultation and consolidation. Inter-institutional collaboration, supported by initiatives like the HEA's GEEF, further strengthens sector-wide efforts (Rothwell and Woods 2025).

Cultivating and maintaining *meaningful engagement, participation and authentic representation* of staff and students with lived experience of inequality and exclusion in a sensitive, ethical manner, mindful of power relations, is paramount to the process of developing and embedding effective equality strategies and actions. Addressing historical power imbalances requires acknowledging institutional legacies of racism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination. Adopting a lens informed by critical race theory illustrates both the value and necessity of practicing methods of representation and engagement which recognise the Eurocentric and culturally normative institutional practices and spaces that serve to exclude people of colour, rendering their experiential knowledge invisible (Nwanze-Akobo & Benson-Olatunde, 2025). Similarly, McCarthy et al (2025) identify that an understanding of the lived experience of disabled students and staff contributes positively to change. Such engagement can only be meaningful if there is a critical consciousness supported by dialogue, reflection and reflexivity at the heart of the process of forming and implementing EDI policy and practice.

Thus, *allyship* is an important element of collectively addressing inequality. While it is recognised that those with lived experience are best placed to articulate the nature and impact of their experiences, it is not their responsibility to fix the structural, systemic and cultural issues which contribute to inequality. Awareness is only part of the process. Implementing this approach requires a fine balance and has its own challenges when power is centralised and hierarchical. In summary, taking some analysis from the consideration of power dynamics central to grassroots community development, it has long been noted that the process is as important as the

outcome, a tenet that is applicable to embedding EDI in HE when engaging with minoritised staff and students (Jackson and O’Doherty, 2012).

Building on this argument, McNeela et al (2025) and Crowley, McGing and Quin (2025) emphasize the need for trauma-informed, supportive, person-centred policies and procedures. This is particularly relevant when addressing *sexual violence and harassment*, highlighted as essential in the national implementation plan on ending SVH in HEIs (HEA, 2022b: 4, 8). It is equally applicable in all other EDI areas.

Adequate, *sustained funding and resourcing* is essential for implementing EDI initiatives and driving systemic change. Senior EDI leaders are now standard posts in Irish public-sector HEIs. Further developments have included specialist EDI managers and practitioners. While responsibility for progressing national EDI policy ultimately rests with the most senior representatives of a HEI (NUI Galway, 2016; HEA, 2016), it is accepted in the Irish context that a specific academic agent of cultural and organisational change is needed in each HEI to help embed GE within all aspects of the work of the institution. This follows international best practice (HEA 2016). The HEA has supported sectoral and institutional resourcing with funding such as the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative and the Gender Equality (now, EDI) Enhancement Fund.

Additionally, the HEA has committed to provision of annual funding to address SVH. This points to the value of committing long term and sustainable funding which helps attract experienced practitioners to deliver complex and multi-faceted strategies and programmes. As Fogarty and Scott (2025) note, given the scarcity of resources in the sector, it is important to ensure there are sufficient resources using both institutional and sectoral funding opportunities. Ultimately, the failure to adequately resource EDI personnel and programmes will result in an increased burden on those already adversely impacted by inequality, discrimination and exclusion, and above all, will maintain the status quo.

2.5 Conclusions, Challenges and Limitations

It would be remiss to omit consideration of the persistent inequalities and prevailing limitations in progressing EDI in Irish higher education. In some instances, actions have targeted individuals who experience discrimination to enable them to progress their careers while allowing the very systems that perpetuate inequality to remain intact. In terms of GE, this approach has been criticised for focusing on ‘fixing the women’. There is also a lack of engagement from those not directly affected by issues which can lead to a disproportionate burden to advocate for change being carried by those most affected. EDI policy development is not without challenges too, and dissent in the form of critical perspectives plays a role in shaping knowledge and driving consistent change (Ruggi and Duvvury, 2023). The consequence of systemic inequality is even more pronounced when intersectional factors are taken into consideration, with characteristics such as race, class, age, disability and sexuality serving as important signifiers in exposing the cumulative impact of inequality. These insights are evident in the HEA reviews on GE which have emphasised the necessity of addressing systemic inequality and cultural change (HEA, 2016, 2022a).

Looking beyond Ireland to Europe and North America, the environment is not currently favourable to supporting EDI in many jurisdictions. Such perspectives also explicitly surface in the HE landscape. There are instances of resistance, backlash and attempts to delegitimise claims for equality and human rights in addition to outright dismantling of EDI policy, practice and infrastructure and the erosion of related legislation (Liyanage, 2022; Ellis, 2024). Although this is not the dominant environment in Ireland in 2025, it is necessary to remain proactive and to safeguard the gains made while continuing to progress towards full equality in Irish higher education.

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