

‘Taking stock of Athena Swan: What value does it add and who decides?’

Summary of key findings

- Prior to the Equality Act 2010, AS created a new set of standards for higher education. However, the requirements for a Bronze level award were overtaken by the introduction of the PSED in 2010. The implications of this major and directly relevant external development never appear to have been properly considered.
- The process which led to expanding the scheme beyond women in STEM in 2015, to all subjects, and all staff, including men under-represented in certain areas, lacks a clear public audit trail.
- The introduction of ‘gender as a spectrum’ in 2021 was presented as sector led but appears to be based on: the inclusion of a very small number of responses to a survey in the formal consultation survey report (in contradiction of the report’s stated methodology); the elevation of this theme by the Steering Group, into a headline recommendation; and Advance HE basing a headline policy position on the Steering Group recommendation. Advance HE has declined to make public the membership and papers for the working group set up to take this policy forward.
- Women are not referenced in the Transformed AS Charter (2021) principles.
- There is a lack of accessible, comprehensive data on scheme membership over time.
- The scheme has not created comprehensive comparable data on promotion or pay, and the revised scheme appears unlikely to change that.¹
- No regular analysis has been undertaken of HESA data to test how scheme membership relates to improved career paths or pay for women.
- The scheme does not make use of the gender pay gap data that universities have been legally required to submit since 2017. As with the earlier introduction of the PSED, the implications of a major and directly relevant external change appear to have been ignored.
- There has been a very large rise in Bronze awards, which make up the bulk of awards and in essence reward universities for taking action to meet their existing legal duties under the PSED.
- Award holders are able to spend a prolonged period at Bronze level.

¹ The new scheme has a ‘mandatory’ data list, but if institutions cannot provide this, it need not prevent them gaining an award. Despite Graves et al.’s (2019) finding about lack of comparability in data submitted, the new scheme continues to be non-prescriptive about format.

- There is no information available publicly on the estimated total cost of the scheme to institutions.
- When analysis commissioned by Advance HE showed no relationship between award holding and improved promotion prospects for women, this result was side-lined in favour of a positive subjective view from AS Champions. Research with this group undertaken independently of Advance HE has, however, found more mixed views.
- The early focus on networking and mentoring for women has been lost.
- The move to recognise that disadvantages due to sex may be compounded by other factors has led to a more loosely defined set of aims, rather than a clearer focus on certain groups of women. Race has been incorporated as a factor, but social class has not, despite substantial work in recent years to recruit and retain more students from working class backgrounds, and this issue emerging in Advance HE's own most recent commissioned assessment of the scheme.

These observations are not a basis for ceasing to be concerned about inequalities based on sex in higher education. It is not uncommon for schemes to drift from their fundamental aim and to become an end in themselves. The AS Charter has no doubt been responsible for positive experiences and developments in Higher Education over the past 20 years. It provides lessons about how work to tackle inequalities in higher education is best done, and the risks, and its limitations are not evidence that this work should not be attempted.

The observations do however argue for the scheme being subject to a properly independent review. While Advance HE has described its most recent review as being 'independent', as noted in part one, the review's separation from the organisation was only partial. The Chair's foreword to the review report makes clear that the review began from the premise that the scheme was effective, and should continue.² (Steering Group, 2020a:1). The report notes, 'At its heart, the Steering Group strongly believes in and affirms the positive and significant impact that the Athena SWAN Charter has had.'³

² Independent Steering Group for Advance HE (2020) *The Future of Athena Swan. The report of the Athena SWAN Charter Review Independent Steering Group for Advance HE*. 31 March 2020 (page 1). Archived March 2022.
https://web.archive.org/web/20220313043458/https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/Future-of-Athena-SWAN_Report-1_1600340258.pdf

³ As above (page 4).

At the same time, the Steering Group review has produced no published information on the cost of the scheme. While the report states⁴ that the Group considered the impact assessment produced by Graves et al., as discussed in part three, there is no indication that that the Group paid attention to its failure to find evidence that membership of the scheme improved women's promotion patterns. Nor did the final report take forward a sub-group recommendation to discourage repeat applications from Bronze award holders.

The 2020 review recommended that AS should be reviewed every five years, by an Athena SWAN Governance Committee that reports to Advance HE, and that 'the next review includes full consideration of the possibility of expanding the Charter to include additional protected characteristics with the goal of moving to an all-embracing equality Charter'.⁵

In our view any further review of the scheme would be better undertaken on behalf of institutions by Universities UK (or some other organisation) wholly independently of the scheme's provider, Advance HE. It should include some assessment of its costs, as well as a systematic analysis of the relationship between scheme membership and improvements in promotion and pay for women over time and, above all, be based on a clear agreed understanding of what the purpose is, of any scheme building on experience to date.

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December 2023

⁴ As above (page 5).

⁵ As above (page 15, Recommendation 41).