

Advance HE Response to the Recommendations from the Independent Review of Athena SWAN

Opening Statement

Few would argue that Athena SWAN has not been a hugely positive agent for change. The Athena SWAN Charter is used around the world to support and transform gender equality in higher education and research. Indeed, there are now over 160 Athena SWAN or partner award members worldwide, holding over 800 awards between them. A recent report by Ortus Economic Research and Loughborough University, funded by the Wellcome Trust, the Royal Society and the Department of Health and Social Care, found that 93% of ‘champions’ believe that the Charter has had a positive impact on gender issues in their university, department or research institute.

A characteristic of the Athena SWAN Charter has been its continuous development, notably when it was widened beyond STEMM subjects to include arts, humanities, social sciences, business and law (AHSSBL). In the context of development, and in response to feedback from users ‘in the field’, one of the first actions Advance HE took shortly after its formation in 2018 was to commission an independent review of the Charter. Our motivation in establishing the independent review was for the great strides that have been made in gender equality to be accelerated through an even more effective, engaging and pragmatic Charter.

We specifically choose to appoint an independent review in order to bring fresh perspectives and objective challenge to the Athena SWAN Charter and its supporting processes. I am delighted to say that the Independent Review Steering Group, led with great commitment, insight and energy by Professor Julia Buckingham CBE, Vice-Chancellor and President of Brunel University London, has not disappointed us. Advance HE’s Board and Executive team are extremely grateful to her and the entire Steering Group for their work to capture evidence and form insights for change, renewal and fresh impetus. This is just what we were looking for, and, frankly, what the sector has been calling for.

Advance HE’s Board, in particular our EDI Committee and Peer Review Quality Committee, has explored the Independent Review Steering Group’s report and recommendations in great detail. I am delighted to confirm that the Steering Group’s work will form the basis of Advance HE’s transformation plan, co-created with members, to ensure a smooth and successful transition from current systems and practice to ‘Athena SWAN 4.0’. We anticipate there being a number of focused areas in which we need to undertake some technical consultation and we will work with members to ensure their efforts to advance gender equality are not negatively affected by this process.

Recognising that Athena SWAN has been adopted in many parts of the world, this is a review of the United Kingdom iteration of Athena SWAN with absolutely no compulsion for change elsewhere. We will work with our international partners to ensure our implementation of changes to Athena SWAN in the UK are not disruptive to its operation elsewhere. That said, the review in the UK does open the opportunity for discussions for how we could bring greater value for our global members through this refreshed Charter and provides insight that could support enhancements in other contexts.

How Advance HE will respond to each of the recommendations made by the Steering Group in the UK is outlined in the table that follows and we look forward to continuing to engage with the sector as we build and deliver the Athena SWAN transformation plan.

Finally, I would like to pay tribute all those people who have engaged in the Charter in whatever capacity. The challenges in the advancement of gender equality remain – in access, representation, progression and success. I believe that a refreshed Athena SWAN Charter is just the stimulus we need to accelerate and sustain change.

Alison Johns
CEO, Advance HE

Summary of key themes

Many of the Steering Group recommendations align with feedback received from member institutions and Athena SWAN institutional contacts over recent months. While Advance HE will continue to engage with members and the sector throughout the transformation process, there are many areas that Advance HE can take forward even at this early stage.

Advance HE agrees that Athena SWAN could and should do more:

- With a continued focus on gender, Athena SWAN should support the consideration of gender as a spectrum;
- Athena SWAN should continue to represent all disciplines, but should also be expanded to include professional service directorates too;
- Athena SWAN should continue to encourage institutions and departments to consider the intersection of gender with other protected characteristics.

These aspects will be reflected in updated Athena SWAN principles on which the Charter is built.

Advance HE agrees that the data burden for applicants can and should be reduced. This will allow more time and energy to be invested into the work of advancing gender equality rather than on the reporting process. We will develop more specific criteria, and define a more focussed mandatory data set. We will work with Jisc and HESA to explore the development of a data portal to make it easier for institutions to collate data.

Advance HE agrees the process of applying for Athena SWAN awards needs to be streamlined and updated to enable quicker turnaround of results and feedback. We will develop an online application process and provide enhanced support for first-time applicants and those seeking award progression.

We are absolutely committed to ensuring the peer review processes surrounding Athena SWAN are both reliable and robust and we agree that new panel roles and processes will need to be developed. Advance HE is extremely grateful to the existing panellists who have supported the operation of Athena SWAN to date and we will work with them to ensure that that experience and reflections inform the development of enhanced peer review process.

Concurrent with the time that the Steering Group was conducting its review, Advance HE made important developments to its governance to provide sector oversight for all its charters and peer review services, including Athena SWAN. Advance HE has established two core committees to ensure the Advance HE Board receive assurance and guidance in relation to Athena SWAN. These are: the EDI Committee, chaired by Professor Geoff Layer, Vice Chancellor of Wolverhampton University and the Peer Review Quality Committee, chaired by Professor Helen Higson, Provost and DVC of Aston University. We appreciate the desire to ensure that Athena SWAN remains sector-led. We will engage with our members and stakeholders to develop new systems and structures to ensure that the sector and member institutions have a powerful and influential voice in the development of the Charter, and that Athena SWAN continues to be 'of and for' the sector.

While there is a great deal to do ensure that Athena SWAN reaches its potential and continues to be an effective driver for positive change, there is also much to celebrate and even more to look forward to. As we build and deliver the Athena SWAN transformation plan we have an outstanding opportunity to create something truly impactful; something that not only supports gender equality, but helps the higher education and research sector develop holistic and inclusive cultures that benefit us all.

Next Steps

The Advance HE Charters team will work with members and stakeholders to build a transformation plan that allows the recommendations to be implemented in a systematic and constructive way. A number of the recommendations can be implemented quite quickly, with little disruption to current operations. Others, understandably, require more substantial development, such as the introduction of online application processes or the development of a data portal. The table below outlines Advance HE's initial response and how we envisage implementing the recommendations. The overarching principle is that we must do this together with appropriate input from members and sector stakeholders. For each of the points below we will work together through new structures of engagement to ensure the transformation plan is sector-informed.

Full detail on the transformation plan and any changes beyond the November 2020 submission will be shared with the sector by 1 October and the transition to Athena SWAN 4.0 will be managed with care as to not add any additional burden to institutions and departments preparing to submit during this time of change.

No	Recommendation Detail	Advance HE Response
1	The Athena SWAN Charter continues to focus on gender equality but that it broadens its scope to reflect gender as a spectrum, rather than focusing on the binary definition of men and women.	<p>We are fully supportive of this recommendation and recognise the limitations of the gender category data currently returned to HESA. How we work to overcome these limitations will require further consideration.</p> <p>We will ensure the Athena SWAN principles further reflect gender as a spectrum and explore other gender categories in a potential data project with HESA and Jisc.</p>
2	The application process allows applicants to address issues relating to the intersectionality of gender with other protected characteristics in their action plans as appropriate.	We will ensure the Athena SWAN principles encourage greater consideration for intersectionality and clarify minimum expectations in award criteria.
3	The Charter continues to cover the full spectrum of academic disciplines. PTO staff should be included in that narrative but the data presented should relate only to the academic staff.	<p>We will build a short period of technical consultation into the Athena SWAN transformation plan to inform the development of Professional, Technical and Operational (PTO) departmental awards and associated criteria. We will explore what PTO staff data should be included and how to reflect PTO staff in the Athena SWAN principles.</p>
4	The Charter is expanded to enable staff in the PTO directorates to apply for their own departmental awards, thus creating an inclusive Charter that supports the development and career progression of all staff, irrespective of their roles in the institution.	
5	Advance HE, in consultation with the new Governance Committee (see recommendation 39), develops a new set of award criteria that reflects the career paths of those in the professional and support services.	

6	The Charter rebrands as Athena Swan (as opposed to 'Athena SWAN') to reflect the expansion beyond STEMM subjects.	We are supportive of this change and will work with UK member institutions to determine a transition to new branding on a timescale that works for them.
7	The current system of institutional and departmental awards is maintained. However, the scope of departmental awards broadens to enable cognate departments to make joint applications, and other groups (e.g. schools, faculties or colleges where there is a degree of cultural homogeneity) to apply as a single unit. Similarly, PTO directorates will be permitted to make joint applications.	We will develop effective application forms and guidance to further support member institutions in making joint applications.
8	Institutional awards focus on institutional policy and practice; the action plan should be designed to bring about institution-wide benefits and to spread good practice.	We will develop effective application forms, criteria and guidance that better differentiate institutional and departmental expectations.
9	Departmental awards focus on i) the implementation of institutional policy at departmental level, ii) departmental policies/practices and iii) culture and leadership.	
10	The current system of Bronze, Silver and Gold awards is maintained for institutional and departmental awards.	We are fully supportive of maintaining the current Bronze, Silver and Gold award system.
11	Applicants seeking a Silver award for the first time must currently hold a Bronze award to enable progress against the action plan to be evaluated; similarly, applicants seeking Gold awards must hold a Silver award.	<p>We agree that this progressive approach will support the demonstration of impact and that this recommendation should be implemented.</p> <p>It is likely that a period of transition will be needed to ensure that institutional strategies are not disrupted.</p>

12	Awards are held for a maximum of five years, commencing from the date of the award letter, not the date of the application. Existing awards are extended to five years from the date of the award letter with immediate effect.	We have developed a light touch process to enable existing and future awards to be extended to five years. See the outline of our approach and the actions requested of current and prospective award holders.
13	Institutions and Departments wishing to progress to the next level of award are permitted to apply at any stage during the tenure of their award.	For the long term financial sustainability of the Charter, this service would need to be in addition to the current services provided through Athena SWAN membership. We will ascertain the costs and propose a price for additional institutional and departmental applications.
14	The requirement for institutions to hold departmental silver or gold awards before applying for an institutional silver or gold award is abolished.	The rationale for this requirement is to ensure that action is supported at departmental level. Technical consultation will be undertaken, to ensure that if the requirement is abolished, the distribution of action is considered through different means. Once the implementation strategy has been agreed we will develop effective application forms and guidance to support members to adjust to this change.
15	The level of support provided by Advance HE to applicants is increased, in particular for first-time applicants. Such support could include webinars providing advice on how to apply for an Athena SWAN award, on-line question and answer sessions, and access to exemplar applications (successful and unsuccessful) for each award level via the web. The effectiveness of the support provided will be monitored by anonymised feedback and reviewed annually by the Governance Committee.	Support available for members has been increased through the new Advance HE membership model and we are committed to the continued development of this service. We will continue to enhance the developmental support for member institutions. We will administer a member survey (including Athena SWAN support) as an annual feedback mechanism to ensure Advance HE responds to the needs of member institutions.

16	<p>Advance HE (a) develops an on-line application process with access via a dedicated portal and (b) introduces the new application forms designed by the Steering Group to ensure a standardised approach to the inclusion of data, and a reduction of issues related to formatting and to reflect the different requirements for new awards and renewals (see recommendations 20-23). A separate set of forms will be developed for Research Institutes.</p>	<p>We are supportive of the development of online application processes and scoping is already underway to identify the most effective system to be used across all Advance HE peer review services.</p> <p>We will develop new online systems and application forms for all award levels and application types.</p>
17	<p>17a Advance HE and Jisc create an on-line data resource accessed via the portal described above, enabling institutions to download, cut and analyse EDI data collected centrally by HESA, OfS, UCAS and SFC.</p> <p>17b With the exception of data on applications for jobs and promotion which should be limited to application numbers and final outcomes, all data which are mandatory for the application are downloaded from this source, thus reducing the burden on applicants and enabling benchmarking where appropriate.</p> <p>17c Table 1 (page 15) details the mandatory data requirements.</p>	<p>We will liaise with Jisc, HESA and other stakeholders to explore the viability of developing such a portal. There are financial and resource implications that will need to be fully considered before commitment to a universal approach can be agreed.</p> <p>We agree that the data burden needs to be reduced and will work with the sector ensure that this is achieved in the most impactful way. We fully support the move to a smaller mandatory data set and we will engage with members to determine the final mandatory data requirements.</p>
18	<p>Applicants include relevant additional internal data to support their action plans and to demonstrate progress against previous plans.</p>	<p>We will develop clear guidance on mandatory and optional additional data and provide support for members in demonstrating progress.</p>
19	<p>Departmental applicants are required to consider departmental culture in their application and to include the data from a standardised sector-wide culture survey conducted amongst their constituents.</p>	<p>We are aware that there are a number of existing institutional and departmental staff surveys in operation, including focus on culture.</p> <p>We will explore the development of a standardised sector-wide culture survey with members and key stakeholders. This will</p>

		consider whether the focus is only on gender or considers inclusivity more broadly.
20	Applicants applying for their first Bronze award, or seeking to upgrade a current award from Bronze to Silver or Silver to Gold, are required to complete a full application which includes both background information and an action plan	We are fully supportive and this reflects current practice.
21	The background information describes the current situation and is supported by mandatory data. For departmental applications this also includes the results of the culture survey. For institutional awards the background describes and evidences institutional policies and practice, while for departmental awards it demonstrates how institutional policies are implemented locally and also describes any local policies/practices.	We will develop clear guidance and application forms.
22	There is no blueprint for action plans. Rather, action plans focus on the issues the institution/department wishes to address in the coming five years. The text, supported as appropriate by additional internal data, describes how the plan will be implemented and SMART targets met once an award is confirmed.	<p>We agree there is no blueprint for action plans.</p> <p>To reduce the burden on members we will develop an optional template and clear guidance will be provided to support members, whether they use the optional template or develop their own.</p>
23	Renewal applications at both institutional and departmental level focus on evidence of progress made against the action plan, describe any new developments, and include an updated action plan taking into account any changes in circumstances.	We are fully supportive of this recommendation and this reflects the new renewal process introduced in December 2019.
24	Institutions/departments are required to demonstrate how they recognise (e.g. through promotion criteria) and support the work of individuals who invest time in (a) preparing Athena SWAN	We strongly support this recommendation. We will ensure Athena SWAN principles encourage this and the criteria clearly articulate expectations.

	applications, (b) implementing and monitoring progress against action plans, and (c) contributing to the assessment process by acting, as members of Athena SWAN review panels as appropriate, and explain how this work is factored into departmental/institutional workload models or equivalent.	
25	Institutions are required to demonstrate that they (a) take a holistic approach to EDI activity, with a named institutional lead and clear governance structures that report to the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and (b) have an effective process for institutional monitoring and reporting.	<p>We are fully supportive of encouraging institutions to take a holistic approach to EDI activity.</p> <p>We will test the concept with members and ensure the Athena SWAN principles encourage this approach.</p>
26	Institutions/departments are required to have a self-assessment team that has a gender make-up which is approximately representative of the institution/ department.	<p>We are supportive of this requirement and it is in line with current expectations.</p> <p>We will ensure the Athena SWAN guidance clearly articulate this.</p>
27	There are six deadlines for applications per year.	<p>We will redesign both internal processes and member guidance to enable improvements, providing greater flexibility and quicker turnaround times for applications.</p>
28	Applicants normally hear the outcome of their applications within two months of submission.	
29	Bronze awards are 'entry level' awards. Applicants are required to describe and analyse their current position and to provide a SMART action plan focused on the key issues the institution/department wishes to concentrate on in the next five years. Holders of Bronze awards are exhorted to be pro-active in progressing to applications for Silver awards within the five years of their award.	<p>We agree that the award criteria need revising and updating.</p> <p>We will first work with members and stakeholders to revise the Athena SWAN principles and once agreed, these definitions will be used to support the articulation of award level criteria.</p>

30	Silver awards are a hallmark of good practice at institutional or departmental level. Applicants seeking to upgrade from Bronze to Silver are expected to show significant progress against their Bronze level action plan, with a clear reflection on what has been achieved, what has been learnt and what has not worked.	
31	Gold awards demonstrate excellence at institutional/departmental level and also provide evidence of good practice developed in-house being translated to other institutions/departments and of the institution/department proactively supporting development in the sector.	
32	Progress is measured against the stated action plan rather than against the data and also recognises (a) critical evaluation and learning from actions that did not achieve the desired outcome and (b) developments beyond those described in the plan that arose through local innovation, recognised and built on good practice in the sector or were initiated locally due to changing circumstances, for example restructuring.	<p>We are fully supportive of this recommendation and this aligns with new renewals process introduced in December 2019.</p> <p>We will develop clear renewals guidance.</p>
33	The current panels are replaced by Panels of Experts with significant experience of EDI as an academic or an EDI professional drawn from a collected pool of approved members. (Further detail is provided within the Independent Steering Group Report).	<p>We recognise the need to develop the current panel processes and need to consider the approach within the wider portfolio of Advance HE peer review services (Fellowship and Race Equality Charter for example).</p>
34	The Panels operate in a manner akin to grant awarding panels. (Further detail is provided within the Independent Steering Group Report).	<p>We will work with the Advance HE Peer Review Quality Committee to ensure that the new assessment processes developed for Athena SWAN are reliable and rigorous, whilst ensuring their integration with the wider Advance HE offer.</p>

35	Awards will only be removed or downgraded unless there is little or no evidence of progress against the action plan since the last application and no reports of other developments.	<p>We have concerns that without careful implementation this could risk devaluing Athena SWAN as a progressive charter.</p> <p>We will work to further streamline and define what evidence of progress is satisfactory and clarify this position in the new criteria and guidance.</p>
36	Unsuccessful applicants receive constructive feedback from the panel chair via panel secretary to ensure they understand the revisions that are required to be successful upon re-submission.	We will build effective feedback mechanisms into the new assessment processes.
37	Advance HE develops an optional service to provide advice for mid-award guidance for award holders via an on-line system, a teleconference or a site-visit. This is developed as a paid-for service with charges on a sliding scale to ensure smaller institutions are able to afford additional support.	<p>This is already provided for institutions via the new Athena SWAN bundle and a similar service for departments would be beneficial.</p> <p>We will develop and cost a support service for departments and test this offer with member institutions.</p>
38	Panel Chairs meet annually to review progress, identify any issues that have emerged and agree a report for submission to the Governance Committee.	<p>We will develop an annual programme of development and feedback for both panel chairs and panellists.</p> <p>The quality assurance of panel chairs and associated processes are overseen by the Advance HE Peer Review Quality Committee.</p>
39	The establishment of an Athena SWAN Governance Committee to provide expert advice and guidance to the Advance HE Board on matters relating to the Athena SWAN Charter, including the modifications and data sets needed to ensure that the new scheme can be adopted by countries outside the UK. Appendix 5 details the proposed terms of reference for this Committee.	Since the formation of Advance HE, the governance of Athena SWAN has been significantly enhanced. Advance HE has two strong governance committees with responsibility for Athena SWAN (EDI Committee and Peer Review Quality Committee). Both committees are made up of senior colleagues from across the sector and report to the Advance HE Board where the responsibility for the strategic oversight and quality of all peer review services ultimately lies.

		<p>We will engage with our members and stakeholders to ensure that the sector and member institutions have a powerful and influential voice in the development of the Charter, and that Athena SWAN continues to be 'of and for' the sector.</p>
40	<p>That this Committee is responsible for conducting a full review of the Charter every five years.</p>	<p>As with all Advance HE's peer review services, rigorous quality assurance and enhancement processes are key to the success of Athena SWAN.</p> <p>The Peer Review Quality Committee will oversee the Advance HE quality cycle including the scheduling of a quinquennial review of each peer review service.</p> <p>This will be reported to the Advance HE Board, where ultimate strategic oversight of the Charter resides.</p>
41	<p>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.</p>	<p>We are fully supportive of the consideration of the development of an all-embracing equalities charter and recognise the complexities that require exploration.</p> <p>We will explore the potential to develop a single equalities charter during 2020/21.</p>