



Certifying Equality?

Critical reflections on Athena SWAN
and equality accreditation

CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF
**WOMEN &
GENDER**



WARWICK
THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

A report for
Centre for the Study of Women and Gender
University of Warwick

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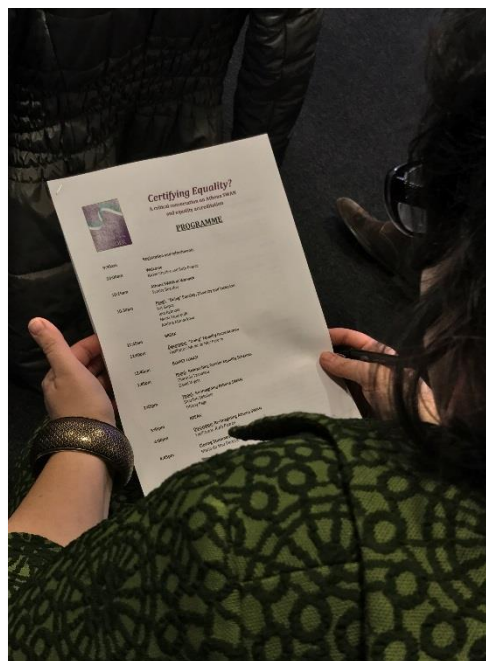
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“One day the institution has a charter mark. How did that happen? What has changed?
– Sharifah Sekalala

Introduction

On 17th February 2017, the Centre for the Study of Women and Gender at the University of Warwick hosted a workshop to reflect upon the challenges and opportunities afforded by equality accreditation schemes such as [Athena SWAN](#).

The event brought together approximately 50 attendees from 17 universities. This included administrators, academics and students who have worked on preparing institutional or departmental Athena SWAN and Race Equality Charter Mark submissions, individuals who have sat on decision panels, and scholars interested in gender equality, some of whom have conducted research into the operation of Athena SWAN. Eight presentations took place over the course of the day, and two ‘open’ sessions enabled all attendees to share their experiences of Athena SWAN.



Slides from the event can be [downloaded here](#).

This report summarises the key themes that emerged over the course of the day, through the presentations and group discussions. We hope that it will be of interest to all colleagues involved in preparing and assessing Athena SWAN submissions, as well as those who work on the design and implementation of equality accreditation schemes. While it does include several concrete examples of good equality initiatives, it is intended primarily as a catalyst for further critical reflection.

The evolution of Athena SWAN

Athena SWAN is an equality charter for universities and colleges, managed by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU). It is a successor to the Athena Project, a diversity scheme for Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths and Medicine (STEMM) which aimed to promote and advance the careers of women researchers in these subjects. SWAN stands for ‘Scientific Women’s Academic Network’, from the Athena Project group that proposed the charter.

Athena SWAN formally launched in the UK in 2005, and the first awards were conferred in 2006. Since this time, the framework has also been adopted in Ireland and Australia.

Like the Athena Project, Athena SWAN originally focused on supporting early- and mid-career women in STEMM. However, in 2015 the charter was expanded to include Arts, Humanities, Social

Sciences, Business and Law departments. The charter's scope was expanded also, to address gender equality more broadly ('not just the barriers to progression that affect women'), as well as incorporating an intersectional approach and addressing the experiences of trans staff and students. Applicants are also now expected to attend to the development of administrative and professorial careers.

There are three levels of Athena SWAN award: Bronze, Silver and Gold. These may be held by both institutions and individual departments. The application process is based on self-assessment, with the expectation being that a representative group of staff will self-assess their institution or department's progress in addressing gender equality and representation and prepare an Action Plan for further progressive change. The resulting submission is then reviewed by a panel of academic peers, hosted by ECU. As of 2017, over 600 awards have been allocated to the 143 Athena SWAN members. However, Silver and Gold awards remain rare, particularly at an institutional level.

The future of ECU

In January 2017, the [Bell Review](#) of Higher Education sector agencies recommended that ECU be formally merged with the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE). Under this plan, ECU may nevertheless maintain its identity, as 'a fully integrated equality and diversity function within the new body'.

The full implications of merging a HE equality body with HE leadership organisations are unclear at present. Event attendees noted that this could have the effect of effectively sidelining projects such as Athena SWAN; conversely, it could effectively work to mainstream equality work. Regardless, these changes may provide an opportunity to intervene in how ECU works, and re-imagine approaches to equality accreditation.



Equality accreditation as catalyst for change

“For STEMM, data is power. You can’t argue with data.”

– Charoula Tzanakou

Numerous event attendees and speakers explored how equality accreditation schemes such as Athena SWAN might succeed in addressing issues of inequality.

Speakers **David Wyatt** and **Charoula Tzanakou** drew upon their research projects with STEMM academics to argue that Athena SWAN has raised awareness of structural inequalities and enabled new conversations about gender to take place. Women participants in a [study](#) by Fehmidah Munir and colleagues (2013) also reported that Athena SWAN had a positive impact in terms of visibility, self-confidence, leadership skills and career development.

In creating a framework to address problems of gender inequality, the charter can provide impetus and grant legitimacy to equalities work, galvanising those already undertaking this work and encouraging engagement from others. Within STEMM, Athena SWAN’s focus on the use of quantitative data to evidence change or continuity can help to build a case for action and encourage departments to adopt new initiatives.

Throughout the day, numerous examples of such initiatives were outlined. Speakers identified several useful institutional and departmental projects, including the creation of academic networks, parental support schemes, speaker series, and sexual misconduct reporting mechanisms. A list of examples from the University of Warwick can be found in the summary of **Sandra Beaufoy**’s talk on page 11.

There was some debate over the benefits and disadvantages of Athena SWAN’s perceived *difficulty*, with submission success rates ranging from 56% to 73% during the 2013-2016 period. While some event attendees saw this as a problem for the charter (see below), others argued that failure could provide a necessary impetus for soul-searching amongst unsuccessful applicants.



The contradictions of equality accreditation

“Sometimes the best way to survive is to avoid equality and diversity projects.”

– Jess Agboola

Despite Athena SWAN’s benefits, the main topic of conversation during the event was the *burden* that equality accreditation schemes can place on departments and assessment teams, potentially leading to ‘charter mark fatigue’. Ironically, this burden is often felt most severely by the very academics that equality charters are meant to help. Many attendees described their experience of exhaustion in undertaking Athena SWAN work, as well as equality work more widely.

Presenters and event attendees alike noted that the work required for Athena SWAN (and similar schemes such as the Race Equality Charter Mark) is usually unevenly distributed within departments and institutions. Many attendees argued that **women are taking on a disproportionate workload**, an observation supported by [research](#) from Louise Caffrey, David Wyatt and colleagues (2016). As women academics and administrative staff undertake this additional labour, male colleagues who are not involved in self-assessment teams have more time to consolidate their career through pursuing research and publications.

Further paradoxes have become apparent as Athena SWAN has evolved in recent years.

Intersectionality

There was a broad agreement amongst event attendees that intersectionality is vital to understanding inequality. This approach highlights how different forms of marginalisation might *intersect* (Crenshaw, 1991). For instance, black women are not simply ‘women’ or ‘black’: they have gendered experiences that are racialized, and racialized experiences that are gendered. In this way, they may experience racism, sexism, and/or forms of discrimination that uniquely combine the two.



“My experience of gender is coloured by my experience of race and vice-versa.”

– Kat Gupta

However, there is a risk that departments and institutions might attempt to undertake an intersectional approach without committing to fully understanding the challenges faced by individuals experiencing intersecting forms of marginalisation. Speakers **Sharifah Sekalala** and **Jess Agboola** echoed Sarah Ahmed (2012) in noting that there is often an undue burden of representation on such individuals, who are frequently expected to be particularly committed to equality work within academic institutions.

Gender parity

Following Athena SWAN's expansion in 2015, submissions are now being made from departments within which a majority of academic staff are women. This change has been accompanied by a shift in focus from 'women's progression' to 'gender parity' amongst students as well as staff. Some event attendees noted that this can lead to a focus on men, for instance through encouraging more male students to study 'feminised' disciplines within the Humanities and Social Sciences. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but can come at the expense of analysing practices that disproportionately disadvantage women even in those fields that are highly feminised. For example, in these fields men are often overrepresented within senior positions, proportionate to the number of women in the department. Similarly, a non-intersectional look at gender parity can ignore how gender differences might be shaped by other forms of marginalisation. For instance, BME women, disabled women and (out) LGBT women are often severely underrepresented even within feminised disciplines.

Problematic interpretations of Athena SWAN's requirements regarding gender parity can also lead to issues within STEMM departments. For example, if self-assessment teams achieve gender parity within heavily male-dominated departments, this means that a disproportionate number of women staff will be expected to work on the team.

Finally, framing gender (in)equality simply in terms of 'parity' between women and men can erase the experiences of non-binary, genderqueer and/or intersex staff and students. Athena SWAN submissions frequently use binary language to discuss gender inequality, thereby failing to account for how individuals who are not women or men might experience marginalisation or discrimination within departments and institutions.

Direct discrimination and sexual misconduct

Equality charters such as Athena SWAN are designed to address embedded structural issues. As such, assessment processes typically focus on issues such as gender balance, pay gaps and parental support schemes, rather than direct acts of (for instance) sexist discrimination or sexual misconduct.

However, speaker **Tiffany Page** noted that problems such as sexual misconduct *are* structural, as instances of harassment, discrimination, bullying or violence amongst or between staff and students may be implicitly condoned by institutions that refuse to recognise the problem or take action. [Research](#) on student experiences has indicated that one in four student women are subject to unwanted sexual behaviour during their studies (Phipps & Smith, 2012). It is somewhat surprising therefore that Athena SWAN does not address this issue.

“Leadership is often performed at a distance. Saying ‘we have zero tolerance of sexual harassment’ doesn’t necessarily translate into departmental action.”

- Tiffany Page

Resourcing

Athena SWAN submissions benefit from being grounded in strong and well-analysed staff and student data, and from the inclusion of innovative initiatives within the action plan. If assessment panels are not sensitive to the specific departmental or institutional context, they may overlook resourcing issues that might hinder submissions.

For instance, areas of expertise differ greatly between disciplines. Many Arts departments are not necessarily as well-placed to analyse quantitative staff and student data as STEM and some Social Science departments.

Similarly, not all institutions or departments have access to the same resources. Therefore, it might be easier for a wealthy institution or department to plan a wider and more varied programme of initiatives to tackle inequality.



Assessment

Athena SWAN submissions are assessed largely by a panel of peers. As the charter has been largely developed within a STEM context, this means that Social Science academics specialising in gender and the workplace have been largely absent from this process. Several event attendees asked about the role (or otherwise) of feminist scholarship and expertise within the Athena SWAN process, and argued that feminist scholars specialising in this area could play a greater role in the charter.

Some event attendees reported that within their institutions, women academics who lead Athena SWAN submissions may be punished by their departments or institutions if a charter mark is not awarded. Examples of this include women who are told that they will have their contract renewed or receive a promotion only if the submission “succeeds”. Other women described being turned down for more senior roles because an Athena SWAN submission they were involved with had “failed” or been delayed. This approach holds individuals personally responsible for collective failings on the part of departments or institutions that may simply fail to meet the Athena SWAN criteria regardless of how hard the self-assessment team or team leader works. It is ironic that a gender equality scheme might be used to *undermine* women’s careers in this way.

Proposals for change

“Simply existing in an environment not built for you is tiring.”

- Jess Agboola



While numerous problems were outlined over the course of the event, speakers and attendees also suggested a number of changes that can be implemented to bolster the benefits of charter mark schemes such as Athena SWAN, and address their contradictions. These are not necessarily easy or absolute solutions, so are presented here to encourage critical reflection as well as action. As speaker **Kat Gupta** argued, institutional change needs to be fully integrated: it is not enough to implement surface-level change, or to merely ensure that there are small pockets of good practice within a larger discriminatory system.

Departmental and institutional actions

Event attendees proposed a number of actions that equality charter mark members can take to address the unfair burden that can fall on individuals (particularly women and non-binary people, and especially those experiencing intersecting forms of marginalisation).

- **Equality work should be fully recognised as work**, and explicitly integrated into workload allocation. Some institutions and departments employ individuals with relevant expertise to work specifically on leading or supporting charter mark submissions and/or initiatives. Others **buy out** academics' time so they can spend several days per week or month working specifically on Athena SWAN.
- **Integrated support for intersectional equality work** is necessary. On an institutional level, this can include providing appropriate, in-depth training on intersectionality for equality and diversity workers regardless of their background to ensure that labour does not accumulate for individuals, and providing emotional support through tailored counselling and therapeutic services. On an interpersonal level within departments, this can involve explicitly acknowledging and celebrating the work of individuals.
- **Women, men and non-binary people could be proportionally represented** on Athena SWAN self-assessment teams and equality committees. This is preferable to aiming for simple gender 'parity' because it ensures there is not an undue burden of representation on one group (usually women).
- **Departments and institutions need to be encouraged to acknowledge failure, rather than only highlight their achievements.** This can lead to stronger, more honest, and more reflective submissions, and help with identifying the actions necessary to bring about positive change.
- **Institutions and departments could build collaborative links** rather than directly compete, sharing resources, ideas and information on successful equality and diversity initiatives.

Wider cultural shifts

Some changes to the operation of equality charters require wider shifts within the Higher Education sector. These can (and ideally, should) be undertaken by individual departments or institutions, but would also benefit greatly from being supported by bodies such as ECU.

- **Humanities and Social Science scholars with relevant expertise should be involved in the design and implementation of equality charters.** For example, a wealth of empirical knowledge and expertise on intersectional gender inequalities in the workplace have been developed by Women and Gender Studies scholars, complementing the contributions of feminist theory. This could be of great benefit to the further development of Athena SWAN.
- **Harassment and sexual misconduct could be incorporated into Athena SWAN.** For instance, institutions and departments could provide information on reporting and accountability mechanisms, as well as support structures for survivors.
- **Institutions could work together to build mechanisms for mutual support** in tackling inequality, rather than schemes that simply pass judgement.

Finally, it was suggested by some attendees that a **single, intersectional equality scheme** might be preferable to a range of schemes addressing inequalities with regards to (for example) gender, ethnicity/race, and disability.



Presentation summaries

Warwick's Athena Journey

Sandra Beaufoy – *Diversity and Inclusion Team, University of Warwick*

Sandra Beaufoy introduced the day by briefly outlining the history and rationale of Athena SWAN. She noted that the charter offers a way to understand departmental cultures, including strengths and weaknesses, through exploring institutional data and engaging staff to find out about their thoughts and feelings. This information can then be used to put initiatives in place to attract and retain staff and students.

Beaufoy noted that this process can entail a number of **challenges**:

- It can be difficult if staff do not “buy in” to the Athena SWAN process.
- A significant amount of time, energy and money is required for a successful submission.
- Charter members may be demotivated in the case of an unsuccessful submission.

However, Athena SWAN may also be useful in **encouraging institutions to undertake initiatives to improve gender equality**. At the University of Warwick, these have included:

- The [Women in Academia](#) working group.
- Workshops that aim to [demystify the academic promotion process](#).
- Outreach activities – particularly within STEMM departments – which encourage girls to develop an academic interest.

A number of these initiatives specifically **benefit parents**:

- The [Academic Returners Fellowship](#), which enables academics to focus on research upon their return from maternity or adoption leave.
- The [Conference Care Fund](#), which provides flexible support for childcare costs associated with conference attendance.
- [Holiday play schemes](#), which provide care support for approximately 800 children during half-term times.
- The [Working Parents' Network](#).
- [Milk Expression Rooms](#).

Most importantly, Athena SWAN has encouraged a change in culture in some areas of the university, which enables new conversations about gender to take place.

Considering an intersectional approach

Sharifah Sekalala – *School of Law, University of Warwick*

Dr Sharifah Sekalala described some of her experiences working on both Athena SWAN and ECU's Race Equality Charter Mark. In critiquing the charters, she reflected particularly on the importance – and difficulties – of taking an intersectional approach. Sekalala argued that while **doing intersectionality** can be *difficult*, it is nevertheless important in equality work, because:

- An intersectional approach involves more (and more diverse) people.
- Diverse, intersectional experiences (such as those of black women) become more visible.
- Nuanced explanations of how and why inequalities persist can be developed.
- More sustainable and inclusive solutions are offered.

Sekalala outlined some common **institutional issues** with undertaking an intersectional approach to equality accreditation:

- Assessment teams may encounter institutional resistance in uncovering intersectional data, including:
 - Direct and indirect prejudice such as racism and sexism.
 - A failure to recognise and acknowledge racism when it occurs.
 - 'Charter mark fatigue', in which people are unwilling to undertake additional work
- The burden of undertaking intersectional work may be felt most by individuals who experience the most marginalisation.
- The informal culture of many universities effectively values homogeneity.
- ECU asks for a lot of 'buy in' from senior members of staff – who generally comprise a less diverse group of people – in preparing award submissions.

Sekalala further described some issues with **measuring intersectionality**.

- Academics and students may not feel comfortable sharing personal details on matters such as race, disability or trans status.
- Apparent diversity (e.g. in terms of ethnicity/race) is sometimes acquired through international cohorts, rather than home students or local communities.
- It can be difficult to acquire non-anecdotal data.
- Intersectional data is meaningless if it is not used to help the people it is describing.

The talk finished with some proposals for **moving forward with intersectional work**.

- Better institutional support is required, including:
 - Creating time for equality roles within departments.
 - Teaching allocations that leave time for equality work.
 - Active appreciation and recognition for people who do equality work.
 - Ensuring that meaningful, sustainable contributions to equality charter submissions can be provided by Early Career Researchers.
 - Ensuring university counselling services are sensitive to intersectional experiences.

Achieving gender equality in HE

Jess Agboola – *Black Women’s Project, University of Warwick*

An undergraduate student member of the Sociology Department’s Athena SWAN Self-Assessment Team, Jess Agboola shared her experiences as founder of the [Black Women’s Project](#). This began as a discussion group for Warwick student women of African or Caribbean descent, and is now also developing a mentorship programme and professional network.

Agboola noted a paradox of the university experience for black women. On one hand, the university environment provides tools and a language for self-understanding and the analysis of racial identity and social injustice. On the other hand, universities can be a difficult environment for black women, particularly in elite institutions with a largely white home student body.

The central tenets of the Black Women’s Project are “Be Well and Do Well”; Agboola stressed that the former tenet is necessary to achieve the latter. On this basis, she outlined a number of values relevant to the Athena SWAN self-assessment process, and outlined some critical questions that arose from these.

- **Visibility and exposure**
 - How inclusive and intersectional are assessment goals and processes from the outset?
 - How are differences between home and international students understood and accounted for? (*on this point, Agboola echoed Sekalala in noting that different challenges and experiences can be conflated into the category of “black students”*)
 - How are lived experiences visibilised and *invisibilised* within statistical data?
 - How can work already happening on the ground manifest in equality charter submissions?
- **Support**
 - How can Athena SWAN assessments recognise and support existing equality work? Can we better link “certifying” equality to “doing” equality?
 - Do we recognise the *emotional labour* of equality work as *work*?
 - How can we ensure that labour doesn’t accumulate for caring individuals?
- **Continuity**
 - How can we certify equality if those experiencing inequality feel too disempowered to undertake equality work?
 - How can we move beyond individualist approaches to inequality?

Agboola further outlined issues that need to be addressed *before* sustainable equality work can take place.

- We need to acknowledge the fatigue that results from negotiating a hostile environment.
- We should move past celebrating visibility for its own sake, focusing instead on justice.
- Intersectionality needs to be fully integrated into institutional processes, to ensure that ‘sustainable’ equality work is part of a deeply embedded liberatory praxis.

Intersectionality and Athena SWAN

Maria Tsouroufli – *Institute of Education, University of Wolverhampton*

Dr Maria Tsouroufli is Athena SWAN Champion for Education at the University of Wolverhampton. In her talk, she outlined some of the positive progress that has taken place as part of the Athena SWAN process in her institution.

- Increased representation of women at Associate Dean level.
- Women increasingly involved in strategic planning.
- More women involved on REF panel.
- Funding for a PhD student to study Athena SWAN:
 - Studying Athena SWAN implementation in STEM departments from an intersectional perspective.
 - Focusing particularly on the experiences of migrant women.
- An Athena SWAN Intersectionality Working Group has been established, to:
 - Meet three times a year.
 - Raise awareness of institutional barriers and means to address them.
 - Research power relations between staff and students.

While the Intersectionality Working Group is a very recent initiative, Tsouroufli argued that it has already had a positive impact, through seeking commitments from the institution to meet the needs of diverse groups of women, and moving beyond a limited white middle-class feminism.

Tsouroufli also outlined some critiques of the Athena SWAN process:

- Athena SWAN risks creating new inequalities due to:
 - Disparities in terms of who gets involved.
 - Disparities in terms of who has the *opportunity* to be involved.
 - Hierarchies that emerge or are replicated within Athena SWAN working groups.
- In focusing on academic women, Athena SWAN might distract from efforts to reach out to other women on campus who might require support and solidarity (e.g. administrative staff, cleaning staff).
- A focus on quantitative data can distract from attempts to understand experiences, rather than just numbers.
- 'Women' are largely constructed as a homogenous group within the Athena SWAN process.
- There is no recognition of LGBT inequalities.
- There is no recognition of the issues faced by migrant women.

Tsouroufli therefore concluded her talk by proposing that those engaging in Athena SWAN work seek to move away from individualistic approaches to data analysis and institutional change, focusing instead on inclusivity and collaboration.

Putting the Athena SWAN charter into practice in a medical school

David Wyatt – *Primary Care and Public Health Sciences, King's College London*

Dr David Wyatt outlined the findings of a research project that analysed the impact of Athena SWAN within STEMM (Caffrey et al., 2016). The study found that Athena SWAN had several positive impacts:

- Raised awareness of gendered inequalities.
- Created space to discuss and address these inequalities.
- Galvanised existing work, providing additional impetus and legitimacy.

However, the researchers found that this positive work was undermined by a range of problems within academic departments.

- **Athena SWAN work was gendered, with women taking on a disproportionate load:**
 - Researchers observed that women carried out most of the work.
 - Women were more likely to volunteer.
 - Women were more likely to contribute in a timely manner.
 - Women were more likely to sacrifice own career gains to support 'everyone else'.
 - Men were more likely to be in positions of power (for instance, as Heads of Department).
 - In one example, this was compounded by a demand from the ECU decision panel that the working group have 50/50 male/female representation in a department with more men than women.
- **There were barriers to access for Athena SWAN initiatives:**
 - Lack of awareness.
 - Email overload.
 - Lack of support for involvement from Primary Investigators leading research projects.
- **There was a lack of administrative support.**

Wyatt further noted external factors that were identified as undermining efforts to improve conditions for academic women.

- Grant funding processes can favour academic men.
- New mothers face a pressure to publish while on maternity leave.
- Temporary contracts undermine job security.
- Social gender roles play a part in inequality: for instance, the normative ideal for women to take on caring roles.

Researching Gender Equality

Charoula Tzanakou – *Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick*

Dr Charoula Tzanakou is the co-lead for a work package on academic careers, gender and culture change for the European Commission Horizon 2020 sponsored PLOTINA project ('promoting gender balance and inclusion in research, innovation and training'). One outcome of this project will be the [Library of Actions](#). This will provide information on gender equality projects for organisations looking for ideas, and for information on the advantages, disadvantages, sustainability and impact of different approaches.

As part of her research, Tzanakou is looking at academics' knowledge of and experiences with Athena SWAN. She argued that within STEMM departments, the charter's focus on quantitative data analysis can provide a powerful case for change. This has led to some important changes within departments.

- New conversations about issues such as work-life balance and departmental cultures are taking place.
- Academics are *thinking more* about gender, with men in particular more likely to observe patterns of inequality that they were previously unaware of.
- New initiatives are taking place to address gender inequality.

However, like Wyatt, Tzanakou has also identified a range of issues with Athena SWAN. In common with many other speakers and attendees, she noted that those directly affected by inequalities are more likely to find themselves taking on the work of changing others' behaviour. She further identified issues with:

- **Awareness and communication**
 - Many staff are not sure what Athena SWAN is.
 - The charter's aims can be difficult to communicate.
 - The impact is often unclear.
 - Different departments can take quite different approaches, leading to confusion.
- **Resourcing**
 - It can be difficult for self-assessment teams to gain the data they really want or need in a timely fashion (or at all).
 - The assessment process is difficult and time-consuming, but this is rarely acknowledged by institutions.
 - Academics' involvement can be limited by the pressure to publish and proliferation of insecure fixed-term contracts.
 - There can be a lack of emotional commitment and creativity on the part of self-assessment teams due to tiredness from overwork.
 - Limited financial resources can lead to a focus on 'quick wins', rather than long-term systemic change.
- **Societal norms**
 - With women more likely to undertake the 'caring' work of Athena SWAN, the charter can reinforce the idea that that women 'naturally' take on caring roles.

- **Moving goalposts**

- Changes to Athena SWAN and a drop in applicant success rates can lead to confusion and cynicism, compounding the problem of ‘charter mark fatigue’.

Tzanakou therefore argued that to be successful, Athena SWAN requires real investment, particularly in terms of communication and resourcing. Decent funding is necessary to create real impact and follow up actions. Departments and institutions need to be allowed (and allow themselves) the time and space to *try* new things and learn from failures as well as successes.

Tackling sexual misconduct through equality frameworks

Tiffany Page – *The 1752 Group*

[The 1752 Group](#) are a UK-based research and lobbying organisation committed to tackling staff-to-student sexual misconduct. Dr Tiffany Page described how the group originally formed to respond to the lack of institutional policies and processes regarding sexual misconduct at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and described emerging approaches to tackle the issue on a national scale.



Page explained that the 1752 Group uses the term **sexual misconduct** – rather than ‘sexual harassment’ – in order to encompass a wide range of inappropriate behaviours from university staff. These include (for example): sexual assault, grooming, bullying, sexual invitations, sexual comments, and promised resources in exchange for sexual access. However, Page emphasised that it is important to think carefully about enforceable professional boundaries and conduct, and provide clear guidance with regards to these.

Sexual misconduct can be effectively condoned and supported through institutional complicity. This can occur when exploitative behaviour is known about but not addressed, but also when students are not given an opportunity to talk about and name experiences of sexual misconduct. Students may be unsure whether they can “actually complain” about their experiences, and may also fear the consequences of reporting misconduct due to power inequalities (particularly if the offending academic is a supervisor) and social stigma. PhD students may be unsure of where professional boundaries lie, for instance with regards to supervisors inviting them to their house or for a meal. Individuals who do make complaints – including supportive academics as well as students – may be bullied out of their position.

Page argued that the problem of sexual misconduct is highly relevant to Athena SWAN.

- Students who have experienced sexual misconduct may quietly disengage from their studies, by taking time off, quitting their course, or sometimes just disappearing. This can contribute to the ‘leaky pipeline’ for women’s academic progression.
- Diversity policies and charter marks can effectively mask continuing inequalities.
- Athena SWAN says nothing about how sexual violence can or should be measured.

At present, there is no national framework or guidelines for culture change with regards to sexual misconduct. There is also very little data on the issue, although the 1752 Group are currently working with the National Union of Students to survey student experiences of sexual misconduct. Page therefore proposed actions that can be taken within the framework of Athena SWAN.

- **Quantitative measures for sexual misconduct** could include:
 - Data reporting on sexual violence and/or gender-based discrimination complaints.
 - Data reporting on interruptions and withdrawal from studies.
 - Tracking of PhD completion rates (with a focus on who is not completing and *why*, rather than bullying PhD students to complete).
- **Institutional action points** could include:
 - A commitment to recording and archiving data on sexual misconduct and violence.
 - Creating or strengthening anonymous disclosure mechanisms.
 - Separate reporting and complaints procedures for sexual misconduct, sexual violence, hate crimes, and gender-based violence.
 - Providing bystander awareness training.
 - Developing professional codes of conduct, including a policy on staff-student relations.

Disturbing Diversity

Kat Gupta – *Department of Communication, Media & Culture, Oxford Brookes University*

In the final talk of the day, Dr Kat Gupta critiqued discourses of diversity within Higher Education institutions, calling on us to reject “easy images” of diversity in favour of a deeper and more systemic approach. They noted that ‘diversity’ (as opposed to ‘diversities’ in the plural) is measured against a norm. In the European context, the norm is embodied in the figure of the white, male, cis, straight, abled student or academic, with ‘diversity’ being a deviation from this.

Quoting [Tim Pippert](#), Gupta argued that “diversity is something that’s being marketed”, with universities relying on images of smiling, happy, ‘diverse’ people on sunny campuses to sell Higher Education as an inclusive product. This can create the impression of a culture that appears more positive than it actually is, thereby hiding the significant complexities and challenges that remain.

Gupta then outlined three models that can be used to understand the different forms of institutional diversity work. With intentional irony, they employed a metaphor of food to do so, noting that non-white bodies have historically been described in terms of food as ‘edible’ or ‘exotic’ through terms such as “skin like caramel”. These problematic metaphors open up non-white bodies for consumption by white people, in a similar manner to university marketing materials. In Gupta’s ironic use of the food metaphor, universities were described as ‘cakes’, with ‘diversity’ represented by various forms of chocolate that can be integrated within the cake to a greater or lesser degree.

- **Diversity as the icing on the cake**
 - Putting ‘diversity icing’ on top of the cake – for instance, through holding talks or producing ‘inclusive’ marketing materials – can conceal the cake and make it look tastier.
 - This doesn’t fundamentally change the structure of the cake.
 - You can remove the diversity without really changing the nature of the institution.
- **Diversity as chocolate chips**
 - Pockets of good practice are held within a non-diverse structure.
 - Diversity is taken seriously, and cannot easily be removed: for instance, there may be peer mentoring, equality initiatives and institutional support mechanisms.
 - There is still a lot of non-diverse thinking within the surrounding structure of the institution.
 - There are arenas in which ‘diverse’ people find themselves without any support: for instance, in cases where individuals have been subject to sexual misconduct.
- **Diversity as fully integrated and structural: a chocolate cake**
 - Practices to support diversity are an *inherent* part of the structure. Examples of this include:
 - Parental leave is embedded within institutional policy and available to all staff, regardless of contract type.
 - Buildings are well-equipped with ramps, hearing loops, accessible doors and toilets.
 - Gender neutral toilets are available.
 - Sensitive approaches to data collection are the norm.
 - The institution cannot remain coherent if these practices are removed.



Gupta's argument is that diversity is commonly treated as the icing on the cake or as chocolate chips, rather than as fully integrated and structural. This raises questions for people doing Athena SWAN work, most notably: *what can or should a genuinely diverse organisation look like?*

Gupta concluded by drawing upon Coleman's (2008) article *Diversity is a Dirty Word* to propose some thinking points for exploring this in the context of Higher Education, using the example of teaching practices.

- **What?** (teaching and syllabus)
 - A diverse syllabus is required, with a range of authors built both into reading lists *and* into key readings.
- **How?** (process)
 - Teaching methods must be sensitive to inequalities.
 - Which academics and students feel unable to take up space? Who is more likely to be marginalised and bullied?
- **Who?** (participants)
 - We need to think about who does and does not feel that the university is a place they have a right to be.
 - Who are the students? Are we setting up spaces to include diverse students?
 - Who are the teachers? What contracts are they on?
 - Who holds the epistemic authority within teaching programmes?

- **Where?** (environment)
 - A matter of both physical access, and social or spiritual access. Are we telling students and staff (*all* staff, including administrators and cleaners, for instance) that they are welcome?
 - Are we using visual aids? Are we using hearing loops and microphones?
 - What signs and statues are present? Who are buildings and lecture rooms named after? For instance: are black students expected to learn in an environment that celebrates eugenicists and slave owners?

Gupta therefore concluded by challenging us to reject concepts of diversity as non-integral to our organisations, and calling on us to embrace diversity as a matter relevant to institutions on every level.

Conclusion

This report was written in response to calls for the development of new and more collegial ways of approaching accreditation schemes and charters such as Athena SWAN. A desire for this approach was expressed throughout the day, emphasised particularly by speaker **Maria Tsouroufli**. We encourage colleagues to share this report far and wide, to encourage further acts of collaboration and further conversations about the rewards, challenges and inequities of equality work.

We are also keen for readers to be in touch with us if they have questions or comments. You can email the Centre for the Study of Women and Gender at: cswg@warwick.ac.uk.

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