

HEA STATEMENT ON ATHENA SWAN CHARTER IN IRELAND

The *Report of the Expert Group: HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions*, 2016 (hereinafter referred to as the Expert Group report) was an important first step in tackling gender inequality in our higher education system. The Gender Equality Taskforce, established in November 2017 by the Minister for Higher Education, Mary Mitchell O'Connor, T.D., developed a *Gender Action Plan 2018-2020* to accelerate the rate of progress towards gender equality in Irish HEIs and ensure that progress is constant and sustainable. The Expert Group report recommended that Athena SWAN award attainment be a requirement for research funding eligibility and, subsequently, the Gender Equality Taskforce gave the HEA responsibility for determining the optimal requirements in relation to Athena SWAN certification. In light of this, HEIs stand to lose access to research funding if they do not achieve Athena SWAN awards within a set timeframe.

This HEA statement aims to clarify these timelines and the implementation process for the HEA Expert Group recommendations and the Gender Equality Taskforce Actions that relate to the Athena SWAN Charter in Ireland.

Attainment of Athena SWAN certification is an important part of the vision for the future but, taking into account the more recent experience of HEIs in the UK to attain Silver and Gold status and the enhanced requirements of the Expanded Charter Application process, the HEA welcomes the Gender Equality Taskforce Action Plan recommendation that the optimal timing and requirements in relation to Athena SWAN certification, and whether a HEI is deemed eligible or ineligible for research funding based on their award status, should be determined by the HEA.

Notwithstanding these enhanced requirements and the revised timelines set out in this statement, the HEA endorses the vision of the Expert Group that Ireland will have achieved gender equality in higher education when Irish HEIs have successfully achieved and retained Gold institutional Athena SWAN awards. In this context, the HEA reiterates the Gender Equality Taskforce's acknowledgement that engagement with the Athena SWAN process has been transformative for HEIs and encourages them to continue to work towards obtaining a Silver, and eventually a Gold, level award. While these timelines refer specifically to Institutional Athena SWAN awards, HEIs should note the importance of working towards and obtaining Departmental awards. This is of particular importance in relation to an application for an Institutional Silver Award, the eligibility criteria for which are that the majority of an institution's departments hold departmental awards and that at least one department has a Silver award.

In relation to the Athena SWAN Charter in Ireland, the Gender Equality Taskforce stated that:

Each HEI will have its own timing in relation to Athena SWAN and there may be multiple organisations (including research funding agencies) that could potentially need to

understand whether an HEI, or departments within HEIs, have made significant progress in relation to addressing gender inequality or not. Therefore, the Gender Equality Taskforce recommends that the HEA should have responsibility for determining the optimal timing and requirements in relation to Athena SWAN certification, and whether a HEI is deemed eligible or ineligible for research funding based on their award status.

The Gender Equality Taskforce Actions in relation to the Athena SWAN Charter in Ireland are outlined below and a statement provided by the HEA in relation to implementation of same.

ATHENA SWAN CHARTER IN IRELAND

HEIs shall apply for an Institutional Bronze award by 2019.

HEA Statement:

- HEIs shall **apply** for an Institutional Bronze award by the end of 2019.*
- HEIs shall **apply** for an Institutional Bronze award within 18 months of notification of a failed Bronze award application.
- HEIs shall **attain** an Institutional Bronze award within 4 years of a first failed Bronze application.

This builds on the Expert Group Recommendation 1.22 and will be used in relation to implementation of the Expert Group Recommendation 3.8. for the research-funding agencies.

* If this target is not achieved, HEIs will be ineligible for EPA, HRB, IRC and SFI funding calls that close after 1 January 2020. This restriction will apply until such time as an Institutional Bronze application is made.

HEIs should retain their Bronze award until such time as they obtain a Silver award.

HEA Statement:

- HEIs should **retain** their Bronze award until such time as they obtain a Silver award.
- HEIs shall **apply** for an Institutional Silver award after one successful renewal of an Institutional Bronze Award and on every subsequent application.

A Bronze Institutional award is time-bound and expires after 3 years (from the announcement of results) or 4 years (from the award submission deadline) depending on whether the award was achieved using the original or expanded process. A HEI must apply for a Bronze renewal award if it is to keep Bronze status. It must be noted that whereas the original Bronze award requires demonstration of clear critical analysis and an action plan to address issues identified, a Bronze renewal application requires demonstration of 'progress' on the original targets/actions identified. This ensures that an HEI is constantly improving even at Bronze level.

A Silver level award requires 'impact' to be demonstrated. The Expert Group Recommendation 3.8 stated that research-funding agencies will require HEIs to have attained an Athena SWAN Silver award by 2023 in order to be eligible for funding. Given the enhanced requirements of the expanded process, the HEA endorses the Gender Equality Taskforce recommendation that a new timeline be developed. This revised timeline will be used in relation to implementation of the Expert Group Recommendation 3.8. for the research-funding agencies.

This revised timeline dictates that once an initial Institutional Bronze Award has been achieved, institutions must renew this Institutional Bronze Award once and then apply for an Institutional Silver Award on each subsequent application. The minimum outcome required for an application for an Institutional Silver Award will be the retention of the Institutional Bronze Award.

These timelines will take into account the one-year grace period offered by Advance HE following a failed application (see below).

IoTs working towards TU status will be required to show evidence to the HEA, annually through their institutional gender action plans, that they are working together to build gender equality into their merger process.

HEA Statement:

The HEA Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality will monitor progress of all HEIs through the annual submission of HEI staff data returns, governance and management structures and institutional gender action plans to the HEA. This will feed into the development of agreed targets and indicators of success for inclusion in the HEI compacts with the HEA as part of the Strategic Dialogue process. As noted in the Expert Group report, the considerable organisational change involved in the establishment of new TUs should be used as an 'opportunity to gender-proof all their policies, procedures and data collection systems' and evidence of same would be expected during the merger process.

Once a TU has been established, it shall be required to achieve a TU bronze award within three years.

HEA Statement:

- Once a TU has been established it shall be required to **attain** a TU bronze award within three years.

Newly established TUs can avail of the Advance HE 'TU Legacy Award Process' to achieve recognition for the gender equality work undertaken by legacy IoTs. Where a TU Legacy Award is granted, the TU has the right to use the Athena SWAN logo until its expiry (the release of results in the Athena SWAN assessment round three years after the TU's formation). This timeframe aligns with the Gender Equality Taskforce Action Plan stipulation that 'once a TU has been established, it shall be required to achieve a TU institutional Athena SWAN bronze award within three years'. To meet this requirement, a TU must, at the latest, apply in the award assessment round immediately before the three-year deadline expires.

The HEA will have responsibility for determining the optimal timing and requirements in relation to Athena SWAN certification, and whether a HEI is deemed eligible or ineligible for research funding based on their award status.

HEA Statement:

As outlined in the Gender Equality Taskforce Action Plan, the HEA will have responsibility for determining whether a HEI is deemed eligible or ineligible for research funding based on their award status, or their progress in seeking an Athena SWAN award, and will update all the research funding agencies in line with this after each assessment round of Athena SWAN. This statement outlines the optimal timing and requirements in relation to Athena SWAN certification, taking into account the Expert Group recommendations and the Gender Equality Taskforce Actions.

Advance HE will provide the HEA with a status update on the applications received and awards made in relation to HEIs eligible to apply under the Athena SWAN Charter in Ireland. The HEA will provide research funding bodies with an update on the eligibility status of HEIs.

These timelines will be reviewed by the HEA as part of the review of progress that will be carried out at the end of the Gender Action Plan 2018-2020.

ENDS

July 2019

Additional Information:**Gender Equality Taskforce comments on the Athena SWAN Charter in Ireland (Gender Action Plan 2018-2020, p. 24)**

Since the HEA Expert Group recommendation was published, the remit of the Athena SWAN Charter has expanded to be more inclusive of all staff working in institutions. The original application to Bronze level focused only on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) staff, whereas now all departments in an HEI will be included, and whereas previously only academic staff were included in the critical analysis, now professional, management and support staff are also included. It now takes into account the experiences of trans staff and students and requires intersectional analysis with consideration of ethnicity.

This has implications for the overall level of work needed to put together an Athena SWAN award application. To be eligible to apply for a Silver institutional award, the majority of departments must hold a Bronze award, and at least one department must hold a Silver award. On average it was recommended that HEIs take a year to do their critical analysis and write their application for an Athena SWAN Bronze award. In the 12 years since the Charter was established in the UK, just 14% of award-holding universities have reached Silver (13 hold a Silver and 83 hold a Bronze). Many focus on a Bronze institutional renewal before attempting a Silver (15 institutions have not yet reached Silver but have renewed their Bronze between 2-4 times).

The Gender Equality Taskforce notes that engagement with the Athena SWAN process has been transformative for HEIs and encourages them to continue to work towards obtaining a Silver, and eventually a Gold, level award. The Gender Equality Taskforce is cognisant of maintaining the momentum that has built up around the Athena SWAN certification, although recognises that the original timelines may now not be achievable. Given that the change in process and requirements outlined above has increased the amount of work involved in a successful application, it may be necessary to provide some flexibility for obtaining awards (e.g. obtain a Bronze by 2019; obtain a Silver eight years after first achieving an institutional Bronze).

Each HEI will have its own timing in relation to Athena SWAN and there may be multiple organisations (including research funding agencies) that could potentially need to understand whether an HEI, or departments within HEIs, have made significant progress in relation to addressing gender inequality or not. Therefore, the Gender Equality Taskforce recommends that the HEA should have responsibility for determining the optimal timing and requirements in relation to Athena SWAN certification, and whether a HEI is deemed eligible or ineligible for research funding based on their award status.

Advance HE grace period following an unsuccessful application:

If an award holder is unsuccessful in renewing their award, they are offered a grace period. This grace period extends from the date of the results letter until the assessment round that falls one year after the results communication, or until the end date of their award validity

(whichever is later). Applicants can submit a revised application at any time during this period and their award remains valid throughout the grace period and assessment of the revised application. Only one grace period is offered per award; if the applicant submits a revised application and is again unsuccessful, their award may be removed or lowered. If an extension has previously been made to the award validity for another reason, the grace period following an unsuccessful renewal may be shortened or unavailable.