

HEA National Committee for Gender Equality¹

Statement on the COVID-19 pandemic and gender equality in Irish higher education

On the 11th March 2020 the World Health Organisation declared the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) a global pandemic. Since then the Irish government has introduced unprecedented measures in order to help slow the spread of the virus. This has led to a new and unusual way of life for Irish citizens, which includes social distancing, self-isolation, quarantining, working from home, home-schooling children, job losses and, for some, the loss of family members and friends. The COVID-19 outbreak is clearly taking a social, economic and psychological toll, and already there are the first indications of its gendered effects.²

Initial responses to the COVID-19 pandemic from a gender perspective have reflected on the effects on society as a whole. However, staff in Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) are also at risk of being affected by the social restrictions currently in place. With this in mind, the HEA National Committee for Gender Equality believes that it is timely to highlight the continued importance of activities in Irish HEIs that are aimed at advancing gender equality in Irish higher education (HE). Emerging areas of concern related to the current situation include research funding implications, pausing of hiring processes and the precarity of staff on temporary contracts and research contracts. Much progress has been made in recent years to advance gender equality in Irish higher education, supported by a strong national policy framework (including the [HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions](#) and the [Gender Action Plan 2018-2020](#)) and achieved through the excellent work being undertaken at institutional level. There is a clear risk that the current situation could result in a major step backwards for gender equality in Irish HEIs.

An immediate impact of COVID-19 restrictions relates to working from home with additional caring responsibilities due to the closure of schools and childcare facilities. Many staff with caring responsibilities are now caring for dependents in the home and will still be asked to work remotely to a normal schedule (with additional demands). As is well documented, caring responsibilities predominantly fall on female staff, and the current situation may have detrimental effects both in the immediate term (on a person's health and well-being) and in the longer term (lack of research productivity hampering career progression). The situation is exacerbated for single parents (mostly mothers) and also includes those who have the responsibility of caring for adults. According to the latest [Higher Education Institutional Staff Profiles by Gender](#) published by the HEA, women account for 26% of professors in Irish universities and 32% of Senior Lecturer Level 3 staff in Institutes of Technology. Unfortunately, gains made in recent years could be eroded as an impact of the current situation. For instance, the research time lost due to the necessity to move to a fully online

¹ The **National Committee for Gender Equality** comprises the HEA, Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) and the Vice-President/Directors of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion representatives from the HEIs.

² <https://eige.europa.eu/news/coronavirus-puts-women-frontline>

mode of teaching and learning delivery combined with the increased burden of caring responsibilities (which disproportionately fall on female staff) has the potential to further delay career progression for female academic staff. For instance, evidence is beginning to emerge internationally that, since the start of the COVID-19 restrictions, women researchers are submitting fewer academic papers than men or, in instances where women's submission rates have remained the same compared to last year, men's have increased, especially with regard to sole-authored papers.³ It is therefore crucial that HEIs consider the gender dimension when developing policies and processes aimed at addressing the current situation.

The Athena SWAN charter has also been a key driver of gender equality in Irish HEIs since 2016. Currently, 44 Athena SWAN awards are held by Irish institutions, including 13 institutional awards and 31 departmental awards. In recent years, the Athena SWAN charter has been further embedded in the national policy context with the linking of award status to research funding eligibility by the Irish Research Council, the Health Research Board and Science Foundation Ireland. Advance HE have responded to the current crisis by extending application deadlines for upcoming award rounds but it is imperative that HEIs continue to support staff working on Athena SWAN applications (who are disproportionately female) and the implementation of associated gender equality action plans. At a European level, the European Commission's recently published [Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#) commits to introducing new measures to strengthen gender equality in Horizon Europe, including the possibility of requiring a gender equality plan from applicants.

The committee commends good practice that is already emerging in Irish HEIs in relation to COVID-19, gender equality and, more broadly, equality, diversity and inclusion. The following is a list of policies and practices currently in place or which the committee recommends are implemented:

- Monitoring of the effects of the crisis on target groups and implementation of specific actions to support such groups as needed, particularly staff with caring responsibilities that may end up with longer-term negative effects on their career progression due to reduced output during the COVID-19 restrictions.
- Use of surveys with all categories of staff in order to get a timely sense of impacts of the current crisis on staff and to gather practical insights into how an institution might help support staff where possible.
- Use of equality budgeting principles and maintenance of supports for gender equality/EDI initiatives during the crisis.
- Continued access to and monitoring of career development supports to female academics.

³ <https://insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/21/early-journal-submission-data-suggest-covid-19-tanking-womens-research-productivity#.XqCIyP1kLnI.email>
<https://www.thelily.com/women-academics-seem-to-be-submitting-fewer-papers-during-coronavirus-never-seen-anything-like-it-says-one-editor/>

- Review of promotions policies to provide special consideration to those whose career progression has been adversely affected by additional caring responsibilities and other impacts of the pandemic.
- Recognition that periods during which full time childcare has been taken on, alongside work responsibilities, should constitute a form of special parental leave.
- Publication of Senior Promotions rounds during COVID-19, indicating ongoing support for attaining gender balance at senior levels.
- Introduction of protections for casual and vulnerable staff (where women tend to predominate).
- Allocation of extra rest days to staff or moving to a four-day week while restrictions are in place.
- Introduction of remote supports for all staff, mindful particularly of concerns of those with caring responsibilities.
- Statements from senior leaders at a HEI on staff wellbeing and the prioritisation of caring responsibilities.
- Provision of specific supports to address staff mental health and wellbeing on their return to campus post-COVID-19.
- Recording of Athena SWAN Self-Assessment Team meetings for staff who cannot attend at the time due to caring/other commitments.
- Preparation of remote/agile working policies informed by the COVID-19 homeworking experience to inform policies on flexible working to support those with caring responsibilities and disabilities, particularly with a view to pivoting back to full remote working if the situation arises.

The HEA, through the Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality, has committed to working with HEIs to advance this important agenda and ensure sustainable advancement towards gender equality in Irish HE. In 2016, the report of the expert group outlined the following vision for Irish HE: “By investing in gender equality, Irish Higher Education Institutions will maximise their pursuit of excellence and successfully meet the many social, economic and cultural challenges of the future.” This statement takes on renewed significance in the context of the current crisis and it is crucial that gender equality initiatives are continued and that any national or institutional strategies or policies in response to COVID-19 are gender-proofed.

The HEA National Committee for Gender Equality calls on Irish HEIs to continue to focus on the excellent work being undertaken across the sector to advance gender equality and to keep this important agenda at the forefront of decision-making at the highest levels.

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