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POSITION PAPER

The Athena SWAN Process to Promote Gender Equity in Third-Level Education in Ireland

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Abstract

Introduction: Sexism and misogyny remains an ongoing threat to optimal health and medical services. An important factor in health and medical services is the education and training pipeline into these careers. A substantial body of literature demonstrates the impacts of sexism in third-level education and training institutions developing future health service staff. Athena SWAN accreditation is a benchmark designed to counter such institutional and individual sexist practices in education settings to foster equality. In recent years the Athena SWAN process has expanded to include professional and administrative staff, as well as academics. This process has also evolved to move beyond a narrow focus on gender, to also include other crucial issues such as race, sexuality and gender identity.

Methods: This examination is based on the author's role as a participant observer and critiques the Athena SWAN process in an Institute of Technology in Ireland.

Results: This examination identifies a substantial number of deficits in the Athena SWAN process, as well as also identifying institutional resistance strategies to such gender equality work.

Conclusion: The current Athena SWAN process in Ireland is critically flawed. Suggested strategies for those engaged in such work into the future are outlined.

Keywords: *Athena SWAN, education, gender equity, Ireland.*

Conflict of interest: None declared.

Introduction

*'Nothing is more obscene than inertia.
More blasphemous than the bloodiest oath
is paralysis'*

(1)

As we start to emerge from the shadow of COVID19 and its variants, the future of healthcare provision in Europe is faced with a number of significant challenges. One important challenge is that of confronting sexism and its impact on the future pipeline of health service workers.

Sexism in the Health Field

Ample evidence exists demonstrating the pervasive nature of sexism in the health services and in university level institutions involved in medical/ health and social care training and research. At their most blatant sexist environments can enable sexual assaults, sexual coercion and physical assault, sexual harassment and active strategies to undermine women (2). The full gambit of sexism in health, medicine and science environments also extends to: macho attitudes, behaviours, and cultures in the workplace, differential pay, promotions, and research and mentoring opportunities for women, as well as an implicit and unconscious bias based on outdated patriarchal stereotypes (3). Although health professionals in training are at particular risk (4), gender based abuse is by no means limited to those in training and continues throughout the careers of many health professionals (2). Tackling such systemic sexism is particularly difficult and complex (5).

The Medical/ Health/ STEM Pipeline

The adverse impact of sexism on the workforce pipeline into the medical field, the allied health and caring professions, and the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics) sector generally is a particular concern, and may be described as critically fractured (6). As well as being an issue in general nursing and medicine, specific gender based

pipeline issues for the future health service workforce have been observed in many fields, including: dental care (7); radiology (8); palliative care (9); plastic surgery (10); anaesthesiology (11); communication and speech therapy (12); biomedical engineering (13); academic surgery (14); and orthopaedic surgery (15).

Athena SWAN

Different European countries have responded to this issue in a variety of ways. A notable response to these issues has been the Athena SWAN benchmarks, which were developed in the UK. The Athena SWAN gender equality accreditation scheme was launched in 2005 by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) (16). This initiative combined two former elements, the Athena Project, and the Scientific Women's Academic Network (SWAN) (17). In the following years Athena SWAN grew dramatically, from involving just 10 institutions in 2005 to 140 in 2017. In 2015 it was extended to include Ireland and Australia, and variations of the Charter have also since been established in both Canada and the US (16,18).

Sexism in Irish Third-Level Education

The focus in this analysis is Ireland, and this examination is based on the author's role as a participant in, and experience of, an Irish higher education institution's application for Athena SWAN Bronze Award accreditation. It is important to note that 'Ireland's Constitution envisages a restricted role for women' and Ireland's first gender discrimination laws were only introduced after it joined the European Community (19). Despite the subsequent introduction of legislation outlawing gender-based discrimination in Ireland (Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015), gender disparities in employment in the Irish Higher Education sector only started to be taken seriously by the Irish Government in the aftermath of the high profile 2014 legal cases of Sheehy

Skeffington v National University of Ireland- Galway and Dempsey v National University of Ireland - Galway (20). In both cases the University was found guilty of gender based discrimination (21), with four more female lecturers also denied advancement subsequently being promoted after a long legal battle (22). In response to such blatant discrimination former European Commissioner (Research, Innovation & Science Portfolio), Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, was appointed to lead an expert group to explore this issue in 2015. The report of this Expert Group identified significant under-representation of women at senior levels among both academic and Professional, Management and Support Staff (PMSS) (23). The Gender Equality Taskforce, which was subsequently established by the then Minister for Higher Education, Mary Mitchell, noted only miniscule improvements and this inertia led to the launch of a Gender Action Plan (24). In the

following year a Centre for Excellence in Gender Equality in the Higher Education Authority (HEA) was established. It is important to note that prior to these developments the position of women in academia in Ireland had actually deteriorated in the preceding decades (25). A HEA funded Gender Equality Unit was closed in 2002, and from 2004 to 2012 the HEA did not publish a gender equality breakdown of the higher education sector (25). Figures 1 and 2 detail the percentage of women by academic grade (Whole Time Equivalents) in Irish Universities and Institutes of Technology respectively. The linear gradient is particularly stark in Ireland's Universities, with only 23% of Professors being women. It is notable that in the latest report on this issue Ireland had never had a female president at any of its seven universities, while there were currently two female presidents in the Institute of Technology sector which encompassed 11 institutions.

Figure 1. Percentage of Women by Academic Grade in the Irish University System

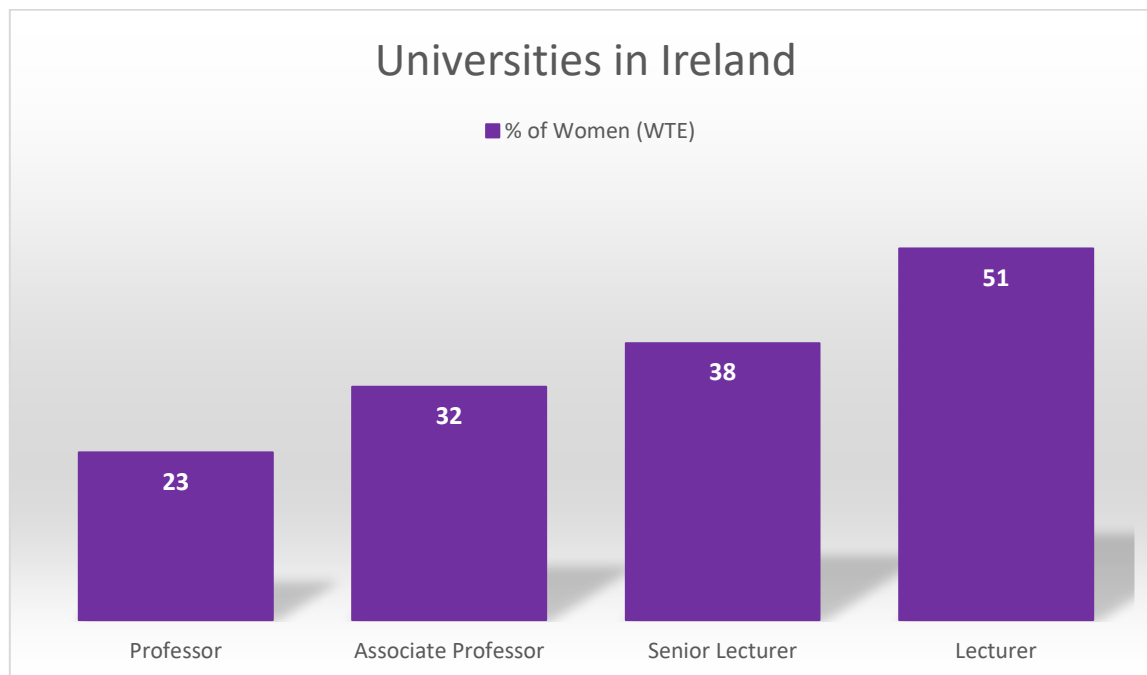
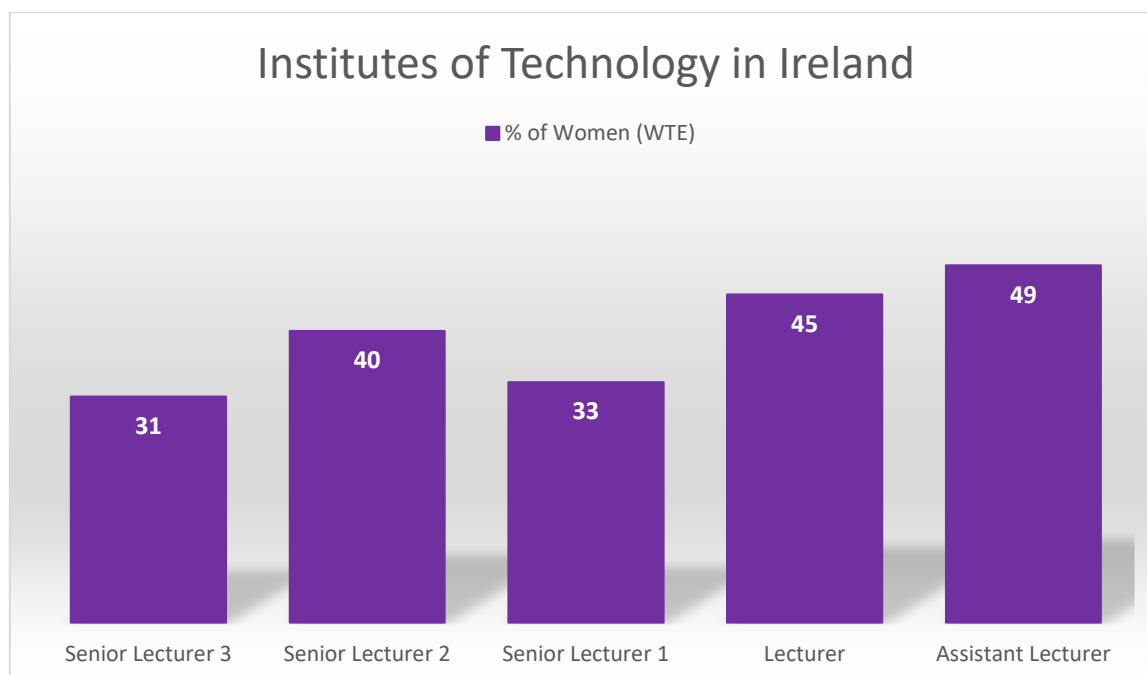


Figure 2. Percentage of Women by Academic Grade in the Irish Institute of Technology Sector



Critiques of the Athena SWAN Process

It is important to note that perceptions of the impact of Athena SWAN are often overwhelmingly positive (26), and particular improvements have been noted among those institutions that have obtained more advanced Silver accreditation (18). The following assessment by Schmidt *et al.* is fairly typical: ‘*Athena SWAN is the single most comprehensive and inclusive gender equality scheme in Europe*’ (27). Critiques of the Athena SWAN process are rare. However, a small number of discordant voices questioning the Athena SWAN project do exist and they reveal a number of significant issues of concern. Some of the negative issues associated with Athena SWAN include the administrative burden it places on institutions (17), as well as observations that women are undertaking the majority of Athena SWAN work, often at a cost to their own career and research (16,17,27-29). Other issues for concern include opposition to perceptions of positive discrimination (30), and critiques

that family friendly policies aimed at women simply serve to reinforce an ideology that women’s role is caring work (17). Other critiques include econometric analysis that suggests that although there have been improvements in women’s representation in many Athena SWAN accredited organisations, this may not be the result of Athena SWAN initiatives (31). Some commentators have also suggested that the link between Athena SWAN accreditation and access to research funding has resulted in the process becoming simply a box ticking exercise (18,28,32), with little or no engagement with wider inequalities, such as social class (28).

Critiques of Gender Equality Work

Wider critiques of gender equality work are also relevant. The concept has often been criticised as ‘tinkering’ and having too strong a focus on data, monitoring, and evaluation (33). It has been suggested for example that bureaucratic norms hinder moves towards gender equality (34). Prüg

discusses such managerialist discourses and approaches that are complicit in neoliberal forms of governance using the term ‘*governance feminism*’ (35). Such approaches focus on the ‘*technicalization and professionalization*’ of gender equity work with its statistical data and implicit ‘*acceptance of... positivist and managerial forms of knowledge*’ (36). This quandary is perhaps best summed up by Ahmed’s statement ‘*you end up doing a document rather than doing the doing*’ (37). A major critique is that feminist knowledge and subjectivities are changed through involvement in such work (33,35,36). Ikävalko & Kantola also emphasise the focus in gender equity work on dialogue, rather than goals, and insightfully state that ‘*action that emphasises dialogue generates an impression of change although nothing transforms in power relations*’ (36). Questions have been asked whether an organisations overt engagement with gender equality work really stems from a commitment principles of corporate social responsibility (CSR) around this issue, or are really a form of ‘*femvertising*’ (38). This research sought to critique the Athena SWAN accreditation process and to further develop and expand the critical literature around this form of gender equality work. Such evaluations are crucial in university level institutions in order to better understand critical issues in the pipeline into careers in STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics & Medicine) subjects. The health of the health services themselves requires an end to overt and covert sexism and discrimination in education, the workplace, and in wider societal settings.

Method

This exploration of the Athena SWAN Bronze Award accreditation process is based on a participant-observer approach involving an examination of Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT), a university level education institution in Ireland. Many

elements of the issues examined are based on the author’s active involvement in the accreditation process. The author was a member of the Athena SWAN Self-Assessment Team (SAT), and was also member of the Data Sub-group. As a member of the Data Sub-group he was responsible for construction and analysis of the online staff survey (using Survey Monkey for data collection and SPSS v.26 for quantitative data analysis), which formed the basis of the institute’s self-assessment. The author was also one of three academics involved in thematic analysis of the open-ended questions involved in the self-assessment survey. This analysis is based on observation of the accreditation process, the results of the quantitative and qualitative examination conducted as part of the Institute’s self-assessment are reported elsewhere (39). A particular focus of this analysis is an examination of notions of power, resistance, and power relationships. This work is informed by the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (40,41). As Ikävalko & Kantola note ‘*feminist resistance is always intertwined with and in interplay with resistance to feminism*’ and that a focus on this ‘*sheds light on the possibilities and challenges involved in transforming gender relations through this kind of work*’ (36). Sharing this information is vital, as a series of equality minimisation tactics and strategies were observed by the author that critically undermined substantive moves towards gender equality. On the basis that ‘*forewarned is forearmed*’ these findings are outlined in-depth to inform and better prepare readers and future participants in Athena SWAN, and similar, accreditation processes.

Site Overview:

Limerick Institute of Technology is a multi-campus university level education institution in Ireland offering training ranging from apprenticeship level to PhD level. It has approximately 7000 students

and is currently based on five sites across three Counties (Co. Clare, Co. Limerick & Co. Tipperary). As an Institute of Technology (IoT) it has an explicit regional focus and is also tasked with widening access to higher education. Traditionally IoTs have been very vocationally oriented, but in recent years, their focus has broadened. LIT is currently in a consortium with a similar organisation, Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT), and is expected to be re-designated as a Technological University (TU) within the next six months (42). In relation to the health and medical staff pipeline it is worth noting that universities are generally seen as more prestigious than IoT's and all medicine and dental programs in Ireland are taught there. The universities also teach all of the Pharmacy, Speech & Language Therapy (SLT), Occupational Therapy (OT), Physiotherapy courses, Dental Hygiene, and Emergency Medical Science courses, as well as the vast majority of courses in Psychology, Midwifery and Social Work. The Institutes of Technology, being more applied and vocationally oriented, are unfortunately generally perceived as being the less prestigious sector in Ireland's binary higher education system (43). As such they teach all of the Social Care Work, and Pharmaceutical

Science/ Analysis courses, and approximately half of the Nursing courses in Ireland.

Results

A significant number of crucial issues emerged throughout the accreditation process, many of which appear absent in much of the Athena SWAN literature to date. The following sub-sections explore issues of: leadership, SAT membership, consultation, coverage, diversity, engagement, pressure, dissemination, links to funding, issues in time and space, whistleblowing, and burnout.

Perfunctory Leadership/ Management

Evidence suggests that effective interventions to combat gender discrimination require the very highest levels of management in an organisation to be *'highly invested in the project or... taking on a leadership role'* (16). Unfortunately, this was not apparent in the organisation in question. Engagement by the organisation's most senior leadership appeared minimal and perfunctory towards the Athena SWAN accreditation process. There is a significant academic literature in the field of business which neatly outlines the crucial differences between leadership and management (see Table 1).

Table 1. The Differences Between Management & Leadership (43)

Management Produces Order and Consistency	Leadership Produces Change and Movement
Planning and Budgeting	Establishing Direction
• Establish agendas • Set timetables • Allocate resources	• Create a vision • Clarify big picture • Set strategies
Organizing and Staffing	Aligning People
• Provide structure • Make job placements • Establish rules and procedures	• Communicate goals • Seek commitment • Build teams and coalitions
Controlling and Problem Solving	Motivating and Inspiring
• Develop incentives • Generate creative solutions • Take corrective action	• Inspire and energize • Empower subordinates • Satisfy unmet needs

On the basis of Table 1 it is therefore undoubtedly true to say that the Athena SWAN process was managed, rather than led, in the organisation in question. This served to critically undermine any impetus towards substantive change.

Membership (who is in and who is out)

A crucial element of control is undoubtedly suppression (45,46). A crucial element of suppression is entry to key groups such as the Self-Assessment Team (SAT) in a process such as Athena SWAN. In the selection process at least one vocal, committed feminist and activist who applied was excluded from membership of the SAT. Further, informal discussions with other colleagues potentially interested in involvement in the Athena SWAN accreditation process revealed that many had no faith in such a process within the organisation and so declined to become involved. Others resisted participation in the process as they felt alienated and damaged by the organisation and hence wanted to restrict their interaction with it to the absolute minimum. Such opting out of the process is an understandable and an important defence mechanism in an organisational culture where bullying and intimidation is widespread (39). However, the impact of such self-selection bias on the inclusiveness of the accreditation process should not be underestimated.

Consultation (who is in and who is out)

One notable feature of the Athena SWAN accreditation process is the absence of any direct communication between the wider community in the organisation being assessed and the Panel reviewing the application. The review process is essentially a paper-based examination, with all documents examined by the Panel being carefully prepared and forwarded by the senior member of executive management leading the accreditation process on behalf of the applicant organisation. This rather limited and closed process is in stark

contrast to other consultations in the Irish Higher Education sector, such as the International Review Panel, whose visits are associated with Institutes of Technology merging and working towards Technological University status. In these visits it is standard for Ireland's Higher Education Authority to establish a unique email address, external to the applicant organisations, inviting confidential comments that are carefully anonymised before being passed to the Panel. This email address is then shared with all staff. The paper based format of the Athena SWAN review with no consultation email prevents staff on the ground from voicing and protesting their concerns. Concerns that may well be ignored, side-lined, or minimised by organisational management (47).

Coverage (who is in and who is out)

There have been two significant expansions in the types of staff covered by Athena SWAN. Although initially targeted at STEMM disciplines, it was subsequently extended to all academic disciplines, and further expanded once again to include professional and managerial staff. Although these are obviously important and worthwhile developments, significant numbers of staff working within the organisation are still not covered by Athena SWAN reporting. Neo-liberal influences have led to the sub-contracting of vital campus services, notably in relation to cleaning, catering, parking, and security services, as well as in the supply of temporary clerical and administrative personnel (48,49). None of these personnel, many of whom are undoubtedly employed on near minimum wage contracts, are covered by the Athena SWAN process and associated accreditation.

Diversity (who is in and who is out)

Historically the Athena SWAN process was rooted in the experiences of women battling for careers in STEMM subjects. The focus

of Athena SWAN also includes race/ethnicity and more recently a focus on gender identity and sexuality. However, although there is an acceptance of intersectionality, a focus on the crucial factor of social class is wholly lacking in the Athena SWAN project (28). The absence of this vital dimension is often routine, and yet continues to critically weaken any systematic attempts to combat inequality (50). This is an ideological blind-spot that reflects neo-liberal attitudes towards poverty, those of blame, shame and stigma.

Limited Engagement

The Athena SWAN process involved a Self-Assessment Team (the SAT) and a

number of sub-groups. Attendance at all elements declined throughout the process. Heavy teaching loads (vis-à-vis the university sector), the bureaucratic processes involved, and widespread staff alienation and distrust undoubtedly had much to do with this. Equally, there was very limited engagement from the wider institutional community in the process. Suggestions by SAT members to promote wider staff engagement went unheeded. For example, Figure 3 details a proposed poster to promote staff engagement with the Athena SWAN process that was never adopted.

Figure 1. Example of a proposed poster to promote wider staff engagement with the Athena SWAN process that was never used (*Reproduced with permission of the Artist, Ken Coleman*)



Subtle Pressures to Edit Results

Following the staff survey and its analysis three members of the Data group of the SAT, including the author, produced a report on the findings. The self-assessment report detailed extensive concerns over sexism, bullying, a lack of trust in management, and fears over reporting such issues. Pressure was subsequently subtly applied to try and encourage the authors to change certain aspects of the report. Ostensibly credible reasons were generally given for such revisions. However, as this editing process developed and further requests to change things were made, the author and at least one colleague stated that any further revisions would necessitate their resignation from the SAT.

Limited Dissemination

As noted above the results contained in the SAT report were damning. Assurances of wider dissemination of the results of the self-assessment by the Institute throughout its five campuses were never honoured. Dissemination of the results of the self-assessment was minimal.

A seminal moment that laid bare the lack of institutional commitment to Athena SWAN principles was the release of the Overview of Findings of the Athena SWAN Survey (39). Links to this report and associated data files were released on Tuesday 17th December 2019. This date is highly significant in terms of seeking to minimise the uptake and impact of the findings from the staff survey, a key component of the accreditation process. The Autumn term finished on the preceding Friday, at the end of exam week. As exam boards are held early in the New Year, any staff not already having decided to take a break and focus on Christmas were in all probability marking exams, assignments, or chasing students for missing coursework. This may be described as a 'Black Report moment' for the organisation (51), a term referencing attempts by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government in the UK to

bury unwelcome findings about the existence of significant health inequalities by, among other nefarious tactics, releasing a report late on the Friday of a Bank Holiday weekend (52,53).

Commitment & Funding

Engagement in the Athena SWAN process was clearly driven by the linkage between accreditation and research funding. Three key funders of research in Ireland: Science Foundation Ireland, the Irish Research Council, and the Health Research Board, have made future funding conditional on Athena SWAN Gender Equality Accreditation. European Union Horizon 2020 funding also includes a distinct gender equity dimension and achievement of Athena SWAN awards will undoubtedly help ensure that the organisation remains eligible for such funding.

Although this 'strategic stick' (32) was undoubtedly essential in jump-starting the organisation's involvement in the Athena SWAN accreditation process, it quickly became apparent that this was the sole driving force behind what passed for the 'engagement' of wider management in the process. It became clear that attaining Athena SWAN accreditation was a simple hurdle to be overcome, without any fundamental attempts to change institutional culture. Critiques of Athena SWAN as a box-ticking exercise have been noted above (18,28,32). However, as the Athena SWAN process progressed it became transparent that continued access to such funding was really the true extent of institutional 'commitment' to the process. This was extremely unfortunate as numerous respondents had specifically noted in their responses to the staff survey that the Athena SWAN process had to be more than bureaucratic 'box ticking'.

Appearances Can Be Deceptive: The Space/ Time Paradox

Two additional issues of concern were observed throughout the Athena SWAN process and subsequent reflection. The first of these deals with time. The first SAT meeting was held on 19th June 2018 (54). It is notable that the academic year for Institutes of Technology in Ireland is very rigid and begins on the 1st of September each year and finishes on the 20th of June (55). The Institutes of Technology largely operate a secondary school based annual calendar, with most academic staff on holiday throughout the summer period. The end of term meeting was nothing more than a cynical attempt to make the consultation process appear longer than it was. This was little more than a perfunctory meet and greet session, followed by a break of almost 3 months. This manipulation of ostensible timelines was an important element in managing the optics of the consultation process to facilitate the illusion of deeper, more-prolonged engagement. A related issue is that of space to discuss deficits in the Athena SWAN process. The author noted deficits and issues in the process and then explored the Athena SWAN Ireland site looking for an opportunity to raise such concerns. It appeared that an ideal opportunity was forthcoming in the form of the first Athena SWAN conference in Ireland on the 10th of June 2021: The Next Steps for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: Advance HE's Inaugural Conference in Ireland. However, upon closer examination, rather than a standard conference in which academics and practitioners generally had an opportunity to apply to speak, this conference was a pre-packaged information event, and not a typical conference as many would understand it.

Appeals/ Whistleblowing

Related to the issue of limited consultation outlined above are a number of critical deficits in the appeals/ whistleblowing process associated with Athena SWAN.

Table 2 details wording from Advance HE's Guide to Processes outlining information relating to the withdrawal of an award.

Table 2. Withdrawal of Accreditation in Advance HE's Guide to Process (56)

Advance HE will not consider information from anonymous sources or which requires further investigation. If requested, Advance HE will not name the source when communicating to the applicant, but anonymity cannot be guaranteed as – depending on the objection – identities may be inferred.

It must be acknowledged that such flimsy protections would make the most ardent whistle-blower circumspect about initiating a complaint (57,58). This deficit is crucial as ample evidence exists in the health and medical arena outlining the negative impacts of whistleblowing on the physical and mental health of those reporting the issue (59,60,61). The flimsy protections for challenging Athena SWAN accreditation are particularly pertinent in Ireland given high profile cases in both the Irish health (61-63) and policing spheres (64,65) where whistle-blowers were significantly compromised because of their reporting. The requirement for non-anonymous communications seeking to contest Athena SWAN accreditation is at odds with legal practice in Ireland in relation to other issues, such as child sexual abuse. Tusla, the State child protection agency in Ireland, encourages reporting from named individuals, but will accept anonymous reporting.

Burnout

In his classic text *The Art of War* Sun Tzu suggests that *'To fight and conquer in all our battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting'*. It is an unfortunate reality that, given the lack of

substantive change to date and the lack of feedback to staff on the findings of the survey, the principles behind Athena SWAN have been further undermined. With most staff alienated, distant and distrustful of this initiative, those still keen to be involved were either excluded from the process, or left due to burn-out. Similarly, it seems unlikely that even those staff that voluntarily opted for involvement in the Bronze application would do so again. From an institutional perspective of maintaining the status quo, this may be a success. The Bronze Award therefore has provided the perfect corporate camouflage for a continuation of ‘business as usual’.

Discussion

The current Athena SWAN process is critically flawed. There are currently a significant number of deficits in the process which clearly need to be redressed moving forward. The expansion of Athena SWAN to include administrative and professional staff is important, but in modern higher education institutions operating in a neo-liberal environment the current Athena SWAN process continues to ignore those engaged in jobs that would once have been integral to the organisation (e.g. catering, cleaning), but which have now been subcontracted out. The irony in the exclusion of these roles from the Athena SWAN process, many of which are part-time, minimally paid roles, predominantly performed by women is painful. Similarly, the expansion of Athena SWAN into examining issues such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity and intersectionality is welcome. However, the exclusion of social class from such analysis is unforgivable. The Athena SWAN accreditation process needs to include wider avenues of contact and consultation with the community being examined. A manicured document produced for limited consultation with hand-picked groups and finally submitted without oversight can be a poor gauge of wider concerns. The

Athena SWAN process around whistleblowing and challenging accreditation is also unfit for purpose. Ample evidence exists demonstrating the physical, psychological and career harm that often accompanies whistleblowing (45,46). Space and time also needs to be built into Athena SWAN activities and structures, such as their conference program to facilitate the ‘airing of dirty laundry’ to facilitate robust discussions and critiques.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This examination demonstrates how an organisation can successfully resist moves to counter sexism and misogyny. Such actions may be termed gender equality minimisation strategies. They include perfunctory leadership that is really only concerned with box-ticking to meet standards for funding applications. Such strategies also include exclusion, limited engagement, pressure to amend unwelcome findings and limiting dissemination. Ensuing staff weariness and burnout from engagement in such gender equality work processes is an added bonus to maintaining the status quo.

It is surprising that more analysis of the organisational cultures of the IoT/ Technological University (TU), and university sector in Ireland has not been conducted. Further examination of cultures that facilitate bullying, intimidation, mistrust and misogyny are required. A useful start in this field would be a project synthesising the findings from the Athena SWAN surveys conducted in each IoT/ TU and University in Ireland.

In order to avoid some of the issues identified in this examination hindering gender equality work in the future, it is suggested that academics and practitioners engaged in similar roles consider adopting the following strategies:

- SAT members take full ownership of the accreditation process;

- SAT members insist on open membership to their group;
- SAT members set a hard timeline for different stages of the accreditation process to facilitate adequate consultation, review and sign-off on the final submission document;

- SAT members take full control of the ‘marketing’ of the accreditation process;
- SAT members take control of the dissemination of their findings;
- SAT members receive a buyout of teaching hours, followed by research leave to make up for time spent on the process.

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