

N3.2 Beaumaris 2 Thursday 6 December 16.00 - 18.00

Athena SWAN: Constraints and Disruptions (0259)

Kate Carruthers Thomas¹ *Birmingham City University, United Kingdom*

This paper reflects on findings of a small-scale, qualitative enquiry into UK institutional experiences of the Athena SWAN Charter for gender equality in higher education (HE). It employs the device of ‘activity space’ to frame HE as a ‘spatial network of links and activities, of spatial connections and of locations, within which a particular agent operates ... within each activity space there is a geography of power’ (Massey 2005, p.55). Mapping Athena SWAN within the context of a stratified UK sector, the paper asks to what extent the Charter’s capacity to address/redress entrenched patterns of silence, discrimination and exclusion is shaped and constrained by HE’s geography of power?

Inequalities for women and BAME academics are well-documented (Acker 2006; Bagilhole 2007; Bhopal 2016; Gabriel and Tate 2017 *inter alia*). The Charter was established in the UK by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) in 2005 ‘to encourage and recognise commitment to advancing the careers of women in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine (STEMM) employment in higher education and research’ (Advance HE 2018). Membership has grown from ten to 143 universities and research institutes; in 2015 the Charter was adopted in the Republic of Ireland (2015) and a pilot began in Australia. In the UK, also in 2015 ‘the framework was expanded to recognise gender equality more broadly ... work undertaken in arts, humanities, social sciences, business and law (AHSSBL), and in professional and support roles, and for trans staff and students’ (*ibid*). By April 2018, the total of Bronze, Silver and Gold Awards stood at 731: 114 Institutional (universities and research institutes), 617 Departmental. In March 2018, ECU merged with the Higher Education Academy and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education to form a new agency: Advance HE.

This preliminary study to a wider piece of research included a literature review of Charter history and six semi-structured interviews: four with Athena SWAN senior leads in UK universities, one with a feminist academic and one with a Charter Manager. It is timely in view of Advance HE’s announcement of an independent review of Athena SWAN to ensure ‘it is fit for current and future needs of institutions, individuals and the sector as a whole’ (2018). While Athena SWAN is widely recognised as a catalyst for institutional actions to address gender inequality, the review responds to criticisms largely focused on the broadened gender equality remit; the inclusion of non-STEMM disciplines and claims that Award submissions are inconsistently judged.

This paper proposes Athena SWAN has become entangled in an established geography of power in which the cohort of institutions with the greatest Athena SWAN ‘capital’ i.e.: multiple Awards, high

Athena SWAN: Constraints and Disruptions

profile 'champions', are also the most powerful in a stratified sector; primarily pre-1992 (and) Russell Group universities with a strong STEM profile. Without their patronage, Athena SWAN would lose viability and validity. Arguably however, a new cohort, primarily post-1992 universities is emerging, who have not previously engaged with the old framework and for whom the expanded framework is business as usual.

Preceding the new equalities legislation in 2010, the Charter has increasingly become part of universities' wider strategies of and business case for, equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). During this period, more complex equalities discourses challenging the gender binary and highlighting intersectionality, have gained traction. Advance HE argue that, as a progressive Charter, Athena SWAN's remit has expanded in response, but university interviewees unanimously expressed discomfort, arguing this blurs the focus and creates tensions between addressing female disadvantage and providing equal opportunities for all. The extension to the wider academy also attracted criticism; interviewees claimed gender balance is 'less of a problem' in AHSSBL disciplines and non-STEMM departments 'have difficulty analysing quantitative staff data'.

Might this study, small-scale as it is, indicate the disruption of an established geography of power relying on the gender binary and on a positivist approach? Findings reveal a polarised dynamic in mature Athena SWAN institutions in which STEM 'experts' coach AHSSBL 'novices'. Might the accusation that Award submissions are inconsistently judged stem from a destabilisation of this dynamic. Athena SWAN's peer review system involves representatives of AHSSBL disciplines and the new Athena SWAN cohort as panellists, judging submissions from mature Athena SWAN universities now applying under the expanded framework. Sometimes these applications are judged unsuccessful. In a shifting sectoral landscape, space 'always under construction ... never finished, never closed' (Massey 2005, p.9), are there echoes of the shockwaves in the sector when Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) results upset university rankings (Weale 2017)?

'Athena SWAN doesn't touch the sides' said the feminist academic interviewee, questioning the Charter's capacity to structurally redress inequality's silences, discrimination and exclusions and arguing that the focus on the career pipeline and conventional measures of academic 'success' mean the Charter is too embedded in academic culture to achieve radical change. This preliminary study raises more questions than answers, not least whether Athena SWAN is implicated in the use of equality and diversity 'as masks to create the appearance of being transformed' (Ahmed 2015).

References

Acker, J., 2006. Inequality Regimes Gender, Class, and Race in Organizations. *Gender &*

Athena SWAN: Constraints and Disruptions

Society, 20(4), 441-464.

Advance HE, 2018. *Athena SWAN Review* [online]. Available from: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/advance-he-announces-athena-swan-review> [Accessed 21 May 2018].

Ahmed, S., 2015. Blog [online] Available from: www.feministkilljoys.com [Accessed 30 May 2018].

Bagilhole, B., 2007. 'Challenging Women in the Male Academy: Think About Draining the Swamp' in Cotterill, P., Jackson, S., and Letherby, G. (eds) (2007) *Challenges and Negotiations for Women in Higher Education*, Dordrecht: Springer.

Bhopal, K., 2016. *The experiences of Black and minority ethnic academics: a comparative study of the unequal academy*. London and New York: Routledge.

Gabriel D. and Tate S.A. (eds), 2017. *Inside The Ivory Tower*, Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books

Massey, D., 2005. *For Space*, London: Sage.

Massey, D., 1998. 'High-Tech in Cambridge'. In R. Ainley (ed) *New Frontiers of Space, Bodies and Gender*, London: Routledge, 157-175.

Weale, S, 2017. Top universities miss out on gold award in controversial Tef test. *The Guardian*, 22 June 2017. 4.