

Gender Equality in Academia and Research

Ireland

PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY IN RESEARCH

Legal framework

The relevant legislative acts promoting gender equality in Irish Higher Education and Research include:

- Employment Equality Acts 1998 to 2015, which prohibit discrimination in a wide range of employment and employment-related areas including recruitment and promotion, equal pay, working conditions, training or experience, dismissal and harassment including sexual harassment and victimisation)^[1];
- Equal Status Acts 2000-2015, which prohibit discrimination on nine grounds including gender. In education, these apply to students/staff attending Irish higher education institutions (HEIs)^[2];
- Institutes of Technology Act 2006^[3] and the University Act 1997^[4], which require HEIs to develop and implement equality policies, including gender equality;;
- Technological Universities Act 2018, which allows Institutes of Technology to apply for University Status, part of which requires incorporating gender equality in all policy documents^[5];
- Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights Equality Commission Act 2015, which requires public bodies (including HEIs) to integrate human rights and equality assessment into their strategic planning process and outcomes^[6];
- Higher Education Authority (HEA) Act 1971, which gives the HEA the legislative responsibility to promote equality in HEIs)^[7];
- Higher Education Authority Bill 2021 (under pre-legislative scrutiny and due to be enacted later in 2021), which requires greater accountability and visibility from Irish HEIs, including in the area of equality, diversity and inclusion.

Policy framework

The HEA's National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutes (2016) created a solid starting point for analysing the slow progress of achieving gender equality in higher education. HEIs were charged with examining their own content and culture and reviewing their own disaggregated data on gender at all levels across all disciplines within their institution. Endorsement of the Athena SWAN Charter was cited as a useful tool in this process^[8].

Following the 2016 HEA review, the "National Gender Action Plan 2018-2020: Accelerating Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions"^[9] was developed in 2017 by the newly created Gender Equality Taskforce. The HEA created a Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality and requested all HEIs to create and publish a gender action plan. HEIs are to report their progress annually to the HEA. All HEIs were required to obtain the Athena SWAN Bronze Award by 2019. The Task Force promoted equality on the nine grounds on which discrimination is unlawful in Ireland and made intersectional recommendations.

The "National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020: Creating a better society for all"^[10] takes an intersectional approach to equality by creating a framework for action to address obstacles and barriers to women's equality in Ireland. It is an all-government national strategy to gender-proof new and existing policies for gender equality. It specifically highlights the Department of Education and Skills' commitment to the development of a science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) Education Policy that address the negative stereotypes surrounding women's participation and careers in STEM.

The STEM Education Policy Statement 2017-202^[11] was developed by the Department of Education and Skills as a roadmap to develop STEM education in Ireland. It emphasises increasing women's participation at all education levels. Robust and sustainable partnerships between schools, the higher education sector (including research organisations), research funding organisations, and the Department of Education and Skills have raised awareness and created incentives for STEM in Irish education.

The "National Framework for Consent in Higher Education Institutions: Safe, Respectful, Supportive and Positive – Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Third-Level Education 2019" seeks to foster a campus culture that clearly and unequivocally condemns unwanted and unacceptable behaviours. Three current initiatives have been significant in informing the recommendations and supporting framework: (1) ESHTe, led by the National Women's Council^[12]; (2) SMART Consent programme run by the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG^[13]); and (3) the Bystander Intervention programme in University College Cork (UCC)^[14]. The HEA is responsible for funding and implementing the framework^[15].

Other stimulatory initiatives

Ireland has three main research funding organisations – the Irish Research Council (IRC), Science Foundation Ireland (SFI), and the Health Research Board (HRB), with a combined annual budget for research of approx. EUR 230 million. In 2017, they announced that all Irish HEIs or research funding organisations were required to achieve the Athena SWAN Bronze Award by the end of 2019, and the Silver Award by end-2023 as a condition of future research funding. Linking research funding to advancing gender equality in Irish HEIs drives forward national gender equality goals^[16].

The IRC's Gender Strategy and Action Plan 2013-2020 requires all funding applicants to demonstrate that they have given full consideration to any potential sex and/or gender dimension in their research proposals. The consideration of sex and/or gender is included in the criteria for assessment and all evaluators are given briefing material on how best to assess applications. Training is also provided for applicants and HEI staff on how to consider sex/gender at all stages of their research. The IRC assesses all research applications gender blind^[17]. The 2016 update of the Action Plan highlighted the positive impact of gender blinding of applicants and strong results supporting gender equality among its early career stage awardees^[18].

The SFI Gender Strategy and Action Plan 2016-2020, "Agenda 2020", initiated and supported a number of stimuli to enhance women's participation in research and research decision-making, particularly in STEM areas^[19]. The SFI's 2018 review of gender redress initiatives highlighted the slow process of achieving gender equality in research applications and content. The SFI has taken several approaches to realising its Gender Strategy. It supports researchers at the most critical junctures in their careers, encourages more applications from outstanding women researchers (e.g. 2020 Preferential Theme that sought more applicants from women research professors to the SFI Research Professorship Programme), redresses gender imbalances within SFI teams, and develops institutional culture and awareness of gender issues^[20].

The Health Research Board (HRB) Gender Equality Policy 2019 commits to addressing unconscious bias in the peer-review process, developing monitoring of gender equality, improving grant management practices through an independent observation study, fostering the integration of sex and/or gender in research and innovation content, and assuming greater national responsibility for promoting gender equality in health research^[21].

The Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality was established in the HEA in June 2019. It aims to ensure sustainable acceleration towards gender equality through centralised support for HEIs and dissemination of good practice. The Centre runs the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative 2019 (SALI)^[22] and the Gender Equality Enhancement Fund (GEEF)^[23], implements the Athena SWAN Charter^[24], the National Consent Framework^[25] and the National Staff and Student Survey on Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment 2021^{[26],[27]}

SALI was launched by the Department of Education and Skills in June 2019. It is an innovative, targeted positive action initiative that aims to accelerate representation of women in senior academic roles in Irish HEIs. SALI will award funding for up to 45 new posts for women in senior academic leadership roles across all Irish HEIs by 2024. This positive action aims to change the existing cultural structures that have led to a greater number of men occupying the higher positions in Irish HEIs, particularly in traditionally male-oriented disciplines^[28].

The GEEF uses HEA award funding to advance gender equality initiatives in Irish HEIs. In 2020, GEEF awarded EUR 286,114 across three areas: (1) research into or advancing gender equality initiatives in Ireland; (2) training programmes specifically addressing gender equality; and (3) Athena SWAN capacity-building activities. Projects were funded across several areas, including the promotion of women role models in the physical sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics (pSTEM), development and implementation of gender identity, expression and diversity training for staff in Irish HEIs, establishment of networks to support women's participation in computer science, resources to support the academic advancement of women in mid-career, provision of gender equality-based leadership training to future leaders, and development of resources to assist departments to model gender-disaggregated data against national trends^[29].

The Athena SWAN National Committee was reconstituted in March 2018 for a term of three years. The Committee comprises representatives from eligible HEIs, Advance Higher Education and the HEA, the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), and Irish research agencies. The original remit was to encourage and recognise commitment to advancing the careers of women in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine (STEMM). It has expanded to include arts, humanities, social sciences, business and law (AHSSBL) and staff working in professional, managerial and support roles (PMSS). A broader undertaking includes consideration of the experience of transgender staff and students, as well as the underrepresentation of men in particular disciplines^[30].

Key actors

In 2015, the HEA initiated a comprehensive national review of all HEIs' gender profiles and gender equality policies. It then produced the "National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutes 2016" as a starting point to analyse the slow progress of achieving gender equality in Irish HEIs^[31]. The Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality was initiated in June 2019^[32].

Research funding organisations active in promoting gender equality and gender in research content include the IRC, SFI and HRB. The IRC and HRB support HEIs in the GENDER-NET Plus programme. Launched in 2017 and set to run until 2022, the programme promotes gender equality in research organisations, research analysis and research content. In 2019, researchers were awarded EUR 1.7 million in funding under this programme^[33].

The IUA represents, supports and advocates on matters of shared sectoral concern and is the interface between universities and the State. In 2019, the IUA set up a high-level group for Vice-Presidents for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, which will coordinate the work of universities in this priority area^[34].

The THEA (formerly Institutes of Technology Ireland) joined with the Dublin Institute of Technology in 2017 to form a cohesive single advocacy body. It supports the sector as it moves toward planned reform of the higher education system, including the creation of a series of Technological Universities in Ireland^[35].

INITIATIVES FOR GENDER EQUALITY BY RESEARCH PERFORMING ORGANISATIONS

The Athena SWAN Charter and Awards is the single most significant gender equality initiative in Irish HEIs and research organisations. The main research funding organisations in Ireland have made compliance with the Charter a condition of research funding. Irish universities have created and published Gender Action Plans (GEPs) on institutional websites by the end of 2019 as part of the Charter's Bronze Award. Institutes of Technology have created GEPs as part of the Athena SWAN Legacy Award, and are expected to achieve the Bronze Award by 2022. Compliance entails each institution creating a working group/steering group to create, disseminate, implement, evaluate and update their GEPs annually in line with the 10 goals of the Athena SWAN Charter. They must also submit their findings to the HEA in order to achieve, maintain or renew their award. This includes working towards increasing the proportion of women employed in their institution, improving the representation of women on committees, enhancing the transition from post-doctoral researcher to first academic post, improving working practices to support career progression, and supporting women's networking^[36]. The Athena SWAN Charter is an invaluable lever in changing institutional and departmental cultures.

Maynooth University developed a National Gender Equality Dashboard for HEIs. The Dashboard was launched by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in March 2021. It offers a valuable baseline to visualise and measure progress on gender equality across all grades of staff in HEIs^[37]. AS part of the Irish Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality 2021, staff at Maynooth University were involved in analysing the pervasive and prevalence of gender-based violence, and COVID-19 as a marked catalyst in advancing gender-based violence^[38].

NUIG's Active Consent team conducted the original research that led to the development of the Active Consent Programme^{[39],[40][41]}. The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Simon Harris, launched the Active Consent Toolkit, including an eLearning module, in September 2020. It is a practical resource, research and strategy development tool that is aligned with the National Framework for Consent in Higher Education Institutions: Safe, Respectful, Supportive and Positive – Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Third-Level Education 2019^[42]. The online "Consent Education Programme 2020-2021, Sexual Violence and Harassment: How to Support Yourself and Your Peers" was available for use from 15 October 2020^[43].

The Bystander Intervention Programme was developed for Irish HEIs by UCC^[44], as a strategic response to the issues of sexual misconduct and violence in the student population. It includes calling out all forms of discrimination in a bid to prompt attitude and behavioural change across the university, among students and staff alike.

The Women in Leadership Conference is a one-day annual event that brings women together and showcases their talent to inspire others towards excellence. Since 2015, the event has been run by University College Dublin's (UCD) Alumni Relations and the Societies Council. The conference has developed and evolved to include the changing role of women and the barriers faced by women entering positions of leadership in the workplace, STEM education, sports, arts and media. It is a professional, well-managed event, with the integrity of a grassroots, volunteer-led, passion project. Every year, it is attended by several hundred participants, and keynote speakers include high-profile business, political and media personalities^[45].

RELEVANT EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES

The Trinity Centre for Gender Equality and Leadership (TCGEL, formerly WiSER), was formed in October 2017. In recognition of its work to recruit, retain, return and advance women in academic science, engineering and technology, its remit was extended to all disciplines and support areas across the university. The TCGEL seeks to deliver sustainable structural and cultural change, and a working environment that exemplifies good practice and equality, by building on the success of the Athena SWAN Bronze Award. In collaboration with partners from the Horizon 2020 project, System Action for Gender Equality (SAGE), and eminent academic researchers across the EU, it published “The Gender-Sensitive University: A contradiction in Terms?” in July 2020. The book explores prevailing forces that pose obstacles to a gender-sensitive university and demonstrates that awareness and embedding of gender equality and gender sensitivity are essential for change. This requires re-envisioning academia to develop new forms of leadership, engage men differently, and facilitate a shift towards fluidity in how gender is formulated and performed^[46].

The government’s trade and innovation agency, Enterprise Ireland, launched the “2020 Action Plan for Women in Business: Fuelling growth through diversity”. The Action Plan aims to drive national economic success by increasing the participation of women in entrepreneurship and business leadership, creating funding that targets women entrepreneurs and women researchers with the potential to advance their research into viable business propositions, and piloting an initiative to include women leaders/senior managers in project teams from third-level institutions^[47].

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.irishstatuebook.ie/eli/1998/act/21/enacted/en/html>

[2] www.irishstatuebook.ie/eli/2000/act/8/enacted/en/html

[3] www.irishstatuebook.ie/eli/2006/act/25/enaced/en/html

[4] www.irishstatuebook.ie/eli/1997/act/24/enacted/en/html

[5] www.irishstatuebook.ie/eli/2018/act/3/enacted/en/html

[6] www.irishstatuebook.ie/eli/2014/act/25/enacted/en/html

[7] www.irishstatuebook.ie/eli/1971/act/22/enacted/en/html

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[12] McCarthy Flynn, Ending Sexual Harassment and Violence in Third Level Education, ESHTe Project, Dublin: National Women's Council of Ireland, 2017.

[13] MacNeela et al., Smart Consent: Development, Implementation, and Evaluation of the SMART Consent Workshop on Sexual Consent for Third Level Students, Galway: University Press, 2018.

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- [24] www.hea.ie/policy/gender/athena-swan/
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- [28] www.hea.ie/funding-calls/senior-academic-leadership-initiative/
- [29] www.hea.ie/policy/gender/gener-equality-enhancement-fund/
- [30] *ibid.*
- [31] HEA, National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions, Dublin: HEA Publishing, 2016.
- [32] www.hea.ie/policy/gender/
- [33] www.research.ie/2019/03/08/minister-mitchell-oconnor-briefed-by-irish-ge...
- [34] www.iua.ie
- [35] www.thea.ie/about-thea/
- [36] www.hea.ie/policy/gender/gener-equality-enhancement-fund/
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