

Gender Equality in Academia and Research

United Kingdom

COUNTRY: Non EU countries

PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY IN RESEARCH

Legal framework

The legislation that covers equality in the UK is the Equality Act (2010), which does not apply in Northern Ireland apart from a few subsections. In Scotland there is also the Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) (Scotland) Regulations 2012 which dictates equality law. The Equality Act (2010) replaced the many previous equalities legislation and Acts, and outlines nine protected characteristics which are the grounds upon which discrimination is against the law in the UK: Age, Disability, Gender Reassignment, Marriage and Civil Partnership, Pregnancy and Maternity, Race, Religion or Belief (including no belief), Sex and Sexual Orientation. The Equality Act applies to all government departments, agencies, higher education institutions and research organisations in the UK and to the education Funding Councils of England, Scotland and Wales. In Northern Ireland, Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 is the key equality Act along with the Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976. The Order prohibits discrimination and harassment on the grounds of sex, and places a duty on public authorities to promote equality of opportunity between men and women generally. The Public Sector Equality Duty, which was created under the 2010 Equality Act, also applies to all higher education institutions and research organisations. It obliges these bodies to: eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation to people due to their protected characteristics; advance equality of opportunity; and foster good relations between different people in settings such a workplaces. Voluntary positive action is possible under this Act and Duty.

Policy framework

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is an assessment of the quality of research in all disciplines in UK higher education institutions required in order to obtain public research funding. The first REF assessment took place in 2014 and was conducted jointly by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and the Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland (DEL). Each institute making a REF submission is assessed on a number of criteria relating to equality and diversity including gender equality. Each institute making a REF submission was required to develop, document and apply a code of practice on the fair and transparent selection of staff. As part of the REF assessment process institutes submit their codes of practice for review by the REF Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel.

Other stimulatory initiatives

The Athena SWAN Charter and Awards delivered and managed by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) is targeted at higher education institutions. The Athena SWAN Charter is based on 10 key principles and it commits the higher education institutions to adopting the principles within their policies, practices, action plans and culture. Charter members are able to submit for institutional and department level Athena SWAN awards at Gold, Silver and Bronze levels. Each award is valid for three years. In 2015, the Charter expanded from its Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) focus to recognise work undertaken in arts, humanities, social sciences, business and law (AHSSBL), to include all higher education professional and support roles, not just academic roles, and promote equality and supports for trans staff and students. In October 2015, there were 134 Athena SWAN members and 537 Award holders in the UK. An independent report into the impact and effectiveness of the Athena SWAN Charter was commissioned in 2013 by the ECU and undertaken by Loughborough University.

Key actors

The Research Council UK (the major RFO in the UK) issued, in 2013, a Statement of Expectations for Equality and Diversity which outlined that equality and diversity should be embedded in all aspects of normal research practice. The Research Council also publishes trend data on its grants awarded and success rates by gender, comparing large and standard grants.

The Scottish Funding Council is in the process of developing a Gender Action Plan (GAP) for all publically funded colleges and universities in Scotland as a key effort to drive gender equality in the sector. The GAP will be implemented on a phased basis, starting autumn 2016. As funding is given and negotiated as part of Outcome Agreements between the Scottish Funding Council and each institution the actions identified within the new GAP will form part of all funding negotiations from academic year 2017-18 onwards.

The Athena SWAN Charter and awards are delivered and managed by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU). The ECU is sponsored by Universities UK, GuildHE, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). The ECU is a limited company with charitable status.

INITIATIVES FOR GENDER EQUALITY BY RESEARCH PERFORMING ORGANISATIONS

Prior to enactment of the Equality Act 2010 and subsequent 2011 Equality Duty, there appear to have been many gender equality plans in research organisations and universities in the UK. Since 2010, the focus has broadened to encompass all nine protected characteristics in the Equality Act. As a result, gender equality plans have become rare and may have become subsumed into broader equality and diversity action plans or statements for research organisations. In October 2015, one Gender Action Plan (University of Cambridge) and one University Female Progression Action Plan (The University of Sheffield) were identified. However, in the context of Athena SWAN award applications, in October 2015, there were 537 holders, of both the ECU Gender Equality Mark and/or Athena SWAN awards, all of whom have produced an action plan as a part of their application process. Once an award has been made there is no monitoring of the action plan by the ECU, until an awardee re-applies, usually after three years, to either renew or upgrade their award. This re-assessment is done as part of the usual ECU peer-reviewed awarding process. There appear to be many initiatives at research organisation level including mentoring schemes, information campaigns, training, and networking events. Many universities also participate in the Project Juno Awards scheme, to address the under-representation of women in physics and support their female staff to attend the Aurora leadership development women only programme, which combines education, mentoring and on-line resources. However, most initiatives are complementary to Athena SWAN action plan and award activities.

Four universities were or are part of consortia of EU-funded structural change projects, namely the Loughborough University (GENDERTIME), the University of Bradford (GENOVATE), the Birkbeck College of the University of London (TRIGGER), and the University of Oxford (DIVERSITY).

RELEVANT EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES

Support for staff returning from maternity leave

In Queens University Belfast (QUB), all Schools have return to work policies, which are funded by the Schools and where feasible, allow for either a six-month teaching free period or research only semester on return from maternity leave, or a greatly reduced teaching load. This policy also extends to female and male staff taking adoption leave. QUB also has a Maternity Cover Fund which is comprised of money reclaimed through Statutory Pay Credits and a contribution from University funds. The Fund provides assistance to Schools and Directorates to ensure that the essential work of all members of staff who take maternity leave is covered. The reported outcome of this Fund and policy is a 100 % maternity leave return rate for QUB since 2011.

Women Academic Returners' Programme (WARP)

This programme was set up by the University of Sheffield. It provides additional support, if needed, upon return to work, to minimise the impact of any extended leave on research activities, thus enabling continued career development. Through WARP, female researchers are able to request up to £10,000 funding to support an additional post, or up to £5000 to support other research related activity (to a maximum total of £10,000) on return from maternity leave. This programme is open to women academics and researchers across all faculties at the University of Sheffield. Through standard maternity cover and WARP, the University of Sheffield aims to create a working environment which encourages all women academics and researchers to flourish professionally.