

The New Athena Swan Charter: Experiences of a Panel Member

Peter Clarkson

*School of Mathematics, Statistics and Actuarial Science
University of Kent, Canterbury, UK*

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School of
Mathematics, Statistics
and Actuarial Science



My Background

- Chair of the SMSAS Athena Swan committee (2011-2020) and led our successful applications for Bronze award (2014) and Silver award (2018)
- Member of sixteen Athena Swan panels (chaired seven panels). Currently a reviewer on Athena Swan panels
- Member of the LMS Women in Mathematics committee 2007–2015, member of the Good Practice Scheme steering committee 2009–2018, chair 2013–2018
- Given presentations about Athena Swan at various events
- Advised over 20 UK Mathematical Science departments about their Athena Swan applications, and universities in Australia and Ireland
- Member of the Costings Task and Finish Group, a working group which was part of Advance HE's review of the Athena Swan scheme in 2019
- Awarded LMS Senior Anne Bennett prize in 2020 for “work to support gender equality in UK mathematics”
- At the University of Kent, I was Head of School (1998–2001, 2013–2015) and Head of Mathematics (1996–1998, 2003–2013)

Athena Swan Panel

Typically a panel has a chair and four reviewers, drawn from a network of about 20 chairs and 60 reviewers, as well as a moderator from Advance HE. These are virtual panels on Zoom.

- Each panel considers about 4–6 applications.
- Panellists send written feedback and their scores to Advance HE two weeks before the panel, which are then circulated.
- For each application, three reviewers are nominated to speak to it.
- The first reviewer presents a summary of the independent assessments of the application, outlining key strengths and weaknesses and highlighting areas of agreement and disagreement amongst the panel.
- The other two reviewers highlight any key issues that have been missed.

Panellists do **not**:

- Introduce any personal knowledge of a department or individuals within a department to the discussion if not contained within the application
- Give personal opinions on a department or individuals within a department if not based on information contained within the application

Criteria for a Bronze award

- Self-assessment of gender equality using quantitative & qualitative data
- Identification of key challenges and opportunities
- An action plan linked to the self-assessment

Scoring Rubric

4. **Good**. The application addresses the criterion very well.
3. **Satisfactory**. The criterion is adequately addressed.
2. **Narrowly missed**. There are some areas requiring improvement to adequately address the criterion.
1. **Poor**. The criterion is inadequately addressed.

Result

- **Award**. Scored at least 3 against each criteria
- **Minor revision**. The application has received a score of 2 for up to three award criterion (as long as all scores are ≥ 2).
- **Major revision**. The application has received a score of 1 for any award criterion or more than three scores of 2.

What makes a good Athena Swan application?

- An **honest reflection** of the data, situation and challenges
- An analysis of the data which **reflects on**, not just repeats what the data says. Panels frequently criticise applications for “lack of reflection and analysis”
- A pragmatic, evidence-based and data-driven approach to the issues
- Data presented clearly and consistently, with numbers and percentages
- Evidence of being **pro-active** rather than **reactive**
- An **SMART** Action Plan that goes beyond **monitoring**, has **measurable outcomes** and addresses the issues that have been identified
- An application which answers the questions posed, not the questions which the applicant thinks should have been posed
- An application which includes illustrative examples and tells a story – it is **not** a box-ticking exercise
- Make things easy for the panel to find and assimilate the information they want

Some common mistakes

- The SAT chair is a junior female academic and has no male professors
- Lack of senior management buy-in; SAT lacks influence
- The gender balance of the SAT is very different from that on other committees in the department
- The HoD letter does not state that resources will be provided to support Athena Swan
- Descriptive, rather than analytical narrative
- “Our data is better than the national average, therefore we have no action planned”
- “The data is not statistically significant so no conclusions can be drawn and no action is planned”
- “Our recruitment data illustrate no clear gender bias at the point of invitation to interview or appointment, therefore no action is planned”
- Action plan not targeted to issues raised and being process driven rather than outcome focused
- The repeated use of the word “monitor” in the Action Plan

Action plan

- An Action Plan should be **SMART** (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely).
- Actions should go beyond **monitoring** and have **quantitative, measurable outcomes**.
- Action plans should have **concrete, realistic targets**.
- Actions should **not** be front-loaded, rather spread throughout the duration of the award.
- Include a **Timeline diagram**.
- Embed references to Action Plan items in the main part of application to illustrate how an issue is to be addressed. These are **not** included in the word count, e.g.

Action 4.1: Hold Unconscious Bias workshops for all staff .

Some Important Issues

- **Induction:** What is in place for new staff?
- **Appraisal:** How often does it happen? Who does it? What does it cover?
- **Committees:** Careful placing of women on strategic committees is important, particularly important for departments with very few women.
- **Workload model:** Is this clear and transparent?
- **Timing of meetings, colloquia and seminars:** Are these in 'core hours', e.g. 10am-4pm?
- **Outreach:** Who does it? Included in the workload model?
- **Flexibility:** Can staff request flexible working ("family friendly lecture times")?
- **Maternity leave:** How is the teaching covered? Do staff take KIT days? If so, how are these used? What are the procedures when staff return?
- **Paternity leave:** What is the take-up?

Supporting and advancing women's careers

• Recruitment:

- * What is done to encourage women to apply?
- * Are you **pro-active** in the recruitment of women? If so how?
- * How do you know if representative number of men and women apply for posts?
- * What happens if there are no women to be interviewed?
- * What is the interview procedure? Do interviewees visit the department and meet members of staff (other than the interview panel)?
- * What input do members of the department have in the appointment process?
- * Do members of the department attend the presentations and give feedback?
- * Does the appointment panel have both female and male members?
- * Is a female member of the department on the appointment panel?
- * Has the appointment panel undertaken **Equality & Diversity** and **Unconscious Bias** training? Is this mandatory or optional?

● Retention:

- * What support is given to new members of staff on probation?
- * Do staff on probation have a mentor?
- * Do staff on probation have reduced teaching loads, and if so what is the reduction?

● Progression:

- * How are promotion candidates identified and supported?
- * Is there a **pro-active** system whereby staff are encouraged to apply?
- * What are the schemes to support candidates for promotion such as workshops and mentoring?
- * Does the department organise events **in addition** to what the university or faculty organise?
- * Are there any specific actions aimed at women, and if there are what are they?
- * Having the department's promotion committee look at all CVs annually is seen to be a good thing to do

Tips for writing an application

- Stay focused
- Be specific and show evidence.
- Two aspects of style which are commonly criticised by panels:
 - * *Statements without evidence*, e.g. “Recruitment to postgraduate programmes has improved since we made open days more inclusive”
 - * *Vague language*, e.g. “a substantial number”, “a high proportion” and “reduced teaching load”
- Use relevant good practice examples
- Adhere to the application word limits
- It’s unlikely there will be a Mathematician, or someone from a similar discipline, on the panel so keep this in mind.
- Don’t use sophisticated statistical methods to analyse the data

Some Challenges

- Getting engagement with the Athena Swan agenda from senior (male) members of the School; in my School several male members have children of school age with partners who work away from Canterbury
- Getting accurate data from the University; in my School we kept a record of some of the important data, in particular with regard to recruitment and promotion
- Complacency; e.g. thinking that having some female members of staff is sufficient. One application stated that 10% of their professors were female (1 out of 10), which is above the national average and said that they were doing fine!
- A “blokeish” culture; e.g. “our seminars have always been at 4pm”

Some Final Thoughts

- Measure bias by outcomes, not feelings
- Unconscious bias has much less effect, or even no effect, without institutional and personal actions
- Putting up photographs of female and black people in your discipline can have significant effect
- Unless inclusivity is active, the outcome is the same as covert exclusion.
- Focussing on inclusive communities allows resources to be devoted to clearing obstacles for participation, as opposed to finding women for reluctant organisers to invite.
- Forcibly inviting women makes for a poor experience for them.

Some Quotes

“When language switched from being focused on women to being about ‘fairness’, men were much more eager to engage with the issues”

Paul Walton (former Head of Chemistry, University of York, the first department to receive an Athena Swan **Gold** award)

“My concern is that Athena Swan applications, like REF and other assessments, encourages us to focus on ‘looking’ good. A colleague suggested that if universities spent more time focusing on ‘being’ good, we wouldn’t have to spend so much time on appearances”

Paul Brennan (Reader, School of Medicine, Cardiff University)

Thank You!

Some SMSAS Initiatives

- Appointment panels and PhD selection panels include female (and male) academics from the SMSAS
- Short-listed candidates are invited to visit the School the day before interview and meet members of staff
- SMSAS staff on probation have assigned mentors and probation supervisors, neither of whom is a member of the SMSAS promotion committee, and have enhanced research funding
- The SMSAS promotion committee, chaired by the HoS with female and male members of the professoriate, identifies future promotion candidates with an annual call for CVs, provides objective evaluations of each case and gives support to staff applying for promotion over a 2-3 year period

SMSAS Initiatives (cont.)

- SMSAS female professors have minimal School administrative duties to reflect that female professors are frequently asked to do other duties for the faculty, university and externally
- Before the pandemic, the SMSAS holds termly lunches with an Athena Swan theme for discussion; the themes have included “promotion” and “unconscious bias”
- Academic staff are given a form annually to request constraints on teaching hours, for example for caring responsibilities
- Reduced teaching load and additional research funding for staff returning from maternity leave. The teaching has to be approved by the Chair and Vice-chair of the School’s EDI committee.
- Fixed-term staff are employed to cover maternity leave

SMSAS Guidelines for Maternity Leave

- The returning staff member is to have a reduced teaching load, similar to that for a member of staff on the first year of probation, for a period of 12 months from the return.
- Where leave commences midway through an academic year, due consideration should be given to the teaching load completed prior to the leave period.
- Where possible, teaching should be of modules which the member of staff has taught previously. Planning for this should be made before the leave commences.
- The normal expectation is that a large administrative role is not taken on in the 12 months from the return to work.
- Teaching and administrative duties should be discussed by the member of staff and the Head of Group before commencing maternity leave, during maternity leave and on return to work. The member of staff is given the option of having a School EDI officer involved in these discussions.
- The teaching duties agreed should be documented in a written plan that should be sent to the Chair and Deputy Chair of the SMSAS EDI committee for approval. In cases of disagreement, the Head of School will arbitrate. Any changes to the plan should also be approved.

- Keeping in Touch Days should be used to support the member of staff's return to work, for example involving research or external scholarship activities rather than teaching, marking or administration. Discussions with a PhD student would be appropriate.
- Appropriate arrangements for the member of staff's PhD students should be made, possibly involving an external person.
- On return, members of staff should have an enhanced travel budget, which can be spent on visitors to Kent, as well as travel. This should be a similar allowance to that for a member of staff on probation. Any unspent funds from this year should be carried forward.
- Members of staff should retain use of their offices during maternity leave, where possible.

SMSAS Promotions committee

- The committee comprises of members of the professoriate, including both female and male members and a member of the School EDI committee.
- Each year the committee asked members of the School to submit their CVs, regardless of whether they were thinking of applying.
- The committee also requested CVs from some people who had not submitted them, in particular if they had not been promoted for a number of years.
- After the committee discussed the CVs, one member of the committee would meet with the member of School concerned to give them one-to-one feedback.
- The objective was to give advice about promotion over a 2-3 year timeframe rather than just before someone applies.
- In our successful application for an Athena Swan Silver award this approach was highly commended.

Athena Swan: strong applications

- Are honest
- Have strong quantitative, qualitative and benchmarking data
- Link data, analysis and action
- Explore reasons behind barriers and target support
- Don't make it a "women's problem"
- Include a SMART action plan

SMART = Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound

Athena Swan: weak applications

- Poor action plan that is not SMART
- Lack of senior management buy-in; team lacks influence
- Descriptive, rather than analytical narrative
- Applications not identifying issues raised by the data
- Action plan not targeted to issues raised
- Actions being process driven rather than outcome focused