

Equality Charters Objections Policy

OPS/02

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Advance HE Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Statement

Advance HE's charitable objects illustrate our clear commitment to advancing equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Encouraging EDI in the workplace as a core organisational value, underpinning internal practice in order for people to feel welcome valued and supported.

At Advance HE, we are committed to creating an environment free of bullying, harassment, victimisation, and unlawful discrimination, promoting dignity, and a safe, inclusive, and respectful environment. We are committed to ensuring that all stakeholders are treated fairly and are not subject to discrimination on any grounds.

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Advance HE Equality Charters Objections Policy

1 Purpose

- 1.1 Advance HE recognises its commitment to supporting Equality Charter's award-holder's progress on gender/race equality work.
- 1.2 During an award period, information might become available that is materially significant to an award-holder's eligibility to continue to hold an Equality Charters or is important for the fair assessment of an application for an award.

2 Scope

- 2.1 In order to support the integrity of Equality Charters, this Policy outlines the steps Advance HE and award-holders should take when dealing with such information.
- 2.2 This Policy sets out the accepted grounds for an objection, the procedure for submitting an objection, the review process, and possible outcomes from an objection.
- 2.3 This Policy is to be adhered to by Advance HE colleagues, members of Advance HE who hold or are applying for an Equality Charters award, and any individual who wishes to raise an objection.
- 2.4 This Policy covers the Equality Charters for Athena Swan UK, the UK Race Equality Charter and Athena Swan Cyprus.
- 2.4.1 Athena Swan Ireland awards and other international charter awards (including, but not limited to, SAGE Athena SWAN) are not within the scope of this Policy.
- 2.5 The impact of structural changes is not within the scope of this Policy. The Policy for Restructuring and Changes to Award-Holding Entities articulates the steps applicants/award-holders, who have recently undergone restructuring, should take.
- 2.6 Advance HE is not responsible for complaints within award-holding units and cannot investigate complaints against members or grievances about individuals. Individuals are advised to follow the complaints/appeals procedure within the institution in question.
- 2.6.1 Advance HE will not intervene in matters between an individual and an institution however reserves the right to take action in instances that relate to an award-holder's eligibility for an Equality Charters award.
- 2.7 Guidance for stakeholders who wish to raise a complaint, comment or matter of concern about the service that Advance HE provides, or the implementation of this Policy is available in Advance HE's [Complaints, Comments and Matters of Concern Policy](#).

3 Definitions

Term	Definition
Applicant	Any entity (e.g. University, Institution, Research Institute, Faculty, School, Department, Directorate, Small and/or Specialist Institution) applying for a Charter award.
Award-holding unit	Any entity (e.g. University, Institution, Research Institute, Faculty, School, Department, Directorate, Small and/or Specialist Institution) that holds an award.
Credible source	Information that has come from a legal authority (e.g. a court or tribunal), a public body (e.g. the Equalities and Human Rights Commission), or another trusted body (e.g. the Office of the Independent Adjudicator).
Equality Charter's Governance Committee	Advance HE holds Governance Committees for each Equality Charter, such as Athena Swan Governance Committee, Race Equality Charter Governance Committee and the Advisory Committee (Cyprus). The term Equality Charters Governance Committee is a collective term in which principles of this Policy applies to each Committee individually.
Head of Charter	Advance HE holds several roles to oversee its Equality Charter services, these include Head of Athena Swan, and Head of Race Equality Charter, or an equivalent role. Under this Policy, the term "Head of Charter" covers all Head of or equivalent roles as a collective in which principles of this Policy applies to these roles individually.
Independently verifiable	Information that can be substantiated by independent means and can be disclosed for the purpose of raising an objection. For example, a verified communication (e.g. an email from a university) or nationally verified data (e.g. Higher Education Statistics Agency data).
Materially significant	New information that provides evidence that the applicant/award-holder has failed to adhere to, or uphold, the Charter Principles and/or does not satisfy one or more of the award criteria.
New information	Information that becomes available that; in the case of an application not yet assessed, may be material to an applicant's case for an award, and in the case of an award already conferred, may be material to the award-holding unit's eligibility to continue to hold that award.

Objection	The process of providing new information (submitted using the Objection to Equality Charters Application / Award template) in respect of an application or an award.
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4 Roles & Responsibilities

- 4.1 The **Head of Charter (or equivalent role)** is responsible for undertaking an initial review of the objection and deciding whether a case exists based on whether the objection is materially significant and/or evidence meets the objections criteria.
- 4.1.1 In cases where the Head of Charter (or equivalent role) is not able undertake the initial review of the objection, the Head of Charter (or equivalent role) is responsible for appointing another member of the team, known as 'a delegated nominee', to undertake the review on their behalf.
- 4.2 Where a case exists, the Head of Charter (or equivalent role) is responsible for the review of representations received and, upon conclusion of that review, making a recommendation to the Deputy Director of Inclusive Institutions.
- 4.3 The **Deputy Director of Inclusive Institutions** is responsible for considering the recommendation from the Head of Charter (or equivalent role), for deciding whether the new information is shared with an Assessment Panel who are responsible for assessing the application or an Objection Panel.
- 4.4 The **Assessment Delivery Team (Charters)** is responsible for keeping a record of each objection, the outcome of the objection and any additional measures identified.

5 Principles

- 5.1 Objections can be raised on the following basis:

Stage	Objection	Example
During the application process	Information becomes available (through receipt of an objection or other means), prior to an award being made, that may be materially significant to an applicant's case for an award.	<i>The information indicates that the application contains false or misleading statements, and these statements are material to the applicant's case for the award. This may include the deliberate omission of information.</i>
Subsequent to an award conferral	Information becomes available (through receipt of an objection or other means) that may be materially significant to the eligibility of	<i>The information indicates that the award-holding unit has failed to uphold the Charter Principles or that the application (on which the award was conferred) contains false or misleading information</i>

	the award-holder to continue to hold its award.	<i>that were material to the award being conferred. This may include the deliberate omission of information.</i>
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- 5.2 In cases where an initial review of an objection indicates that a case exists, Advance HE will invite the applicant/award-holder to make written representations.
- 5.3 Where it is evident that a relevant enhancement/improvement plan is in place, no further action is taken. In the case of applicants, a peer-review panel will assess the application as standard, against the award criteria, and, in the case of award-holders, the current award validity is unchanged.
- 5.4 Where relevant actions are not evident, a panel is convened to consider the objection alongside representations received. In the case of an objection to an application, an Assessment Panel is convened. In the case of an objection to an award, an Objection Panel is convened.
- 5.5 Wherever possible, Advance HE requests that interested parties aim to raise concerns about applications or awards and attempt to find a resolution with the relevant applicant/award-holder directly before raising an objection with Advance HE.
- 5.6 Where appropriate, Advance HE may refer an objection back to an objector to follow-up via the appropriate complaints/appeals procedure within their institution and/or request the award-holding unit conducts their own investigation into a complaint and, if appropriate, notifies Advance HE of the outcome.

6 Grounds for Objections

- 6.1 An objection can be submitted by anyone, including a group objecting collectively, providing that all named individuals object for the same reason.
- 6.1.1 If the objection is a collective one, in order to manage the process effectively, the group must nominate one person to act as representative and main contact.
- 6.2 The new information identified or received must be independently verifiable and/or be received from a credible source. The new information must be materially significant to the applicant's/award-holder's eligibility for the award by providing evidence that they:
- Have failed to adhere to, or uphold, the Charter Principles; and/or
 - Do not satisfy one or more of the award criteria.
- 6.3 Advance HE will not consider objections from anonymous sources, or which requires further investigation due to the requirements of verification.

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- 6.4 Advance HE will not name the source of an objection when communicating to the applicant/award-holder, but anonymity cannot be guaranteed as evidence supplied with the objection will need to be shared with an applicant/award-holder in full in order for them to have a fair chance to respond and this, may contain identifiers.
 - 6.5 Personal data will be held and processed in line with the UK Data Protection legislation.
 - 6.6 Advance HE cannot investigate individual behaviour or grievances against individuals; and objections must be relevant to organisational actions, processes or failures that affect eligibility for an award.
 - 6.7 The objection must be submitted on the Objection to Equality Charters Application / Award template ([Appendix B](#)) for which a limit of 1,000 words applies. Any supporting evidence, such as a tribunal report, should not include further narrative and must be cited in the objection with its relevance clearly explained.

Procedure

7 Initial Review Stage

- 7.1 Where an objection has been received, the Head of Charter (or equivalent role), or their delegated nominee, will undertake an initial review of the objection and consider the potential impact of the information presented on the applicant's/award-holder's eligibility for the award.
- 7.2 In cases where the Head of Charter (or equivalent role), or their delegated nominee, considers that the objection does not impact on the applicant's/award-holder's eligibility for the award, the person(s) who raised the objection will be informed that the objection does not meet the permitted grounds and that no further action will be taken.
- 7.3 In cases where the review indicates that the objection may have an impact on the applicant's/award-holder's eligibility for the award, the applicant/award-holder is invited to submit representations and the person(s) who submitted the objection will be notified that representations have been sought.
- 7.4 Where an application is currently undergoing assessment, the assessment process will be suspended while representations are sought and reviewed.
 - 7.4.1 If the timing of when an objection is received does not allow the Head of Charter to review the objection before the application is assessed, the assessment will proceed, but conferral of an award, if recommended by the Peer Review Assessment Panel, will be pending until the objection is resolved.
- 7.5 The person(s) who raised the objection will be notified of the outcome of the initial review within 30 working days of receipt of the objection.

- 7.6 If this decision is likely to be delayed, Advance HE will communicate the updated timeframe to the named contact, as per the submitted objection.

8 Escalation Stage

8.1 Invitation to Submit Representations

8.1.1 In cases where the initial review has concluded that the objection may have an impact on the applicant's/award-holder's eligibility for the award, the relevant Head of Charter (or equivalent role), or their delegated nominee, will send a formal written communication to the applicant/award-holding unit that:

- Provides notice that Advance HE has received new information that it considers could be important for the fair assessment of an award/impact the award-holder's eligibility for the award.
- Summarises the grounds for the conclusion that the objection may be materially significant to the applicant's/award-holder's eligibility for the award.
- Invites the applicant/award-holder to make written representations.

8.1.2 The applicant/award-holder will be given a period of 10 working days from the date of the invitation to submit representations. Representations should be made in writing to the relevant Head of Charter (or equivalent role), or their delegated nominee, be no more than 1,000 words; and should include one of the following:

Stage	Representations
Application	Clearly set out the grounds on which the applicant considers the information provided in the objection to be immaterial to the case for an award and therefore should not be shared with the Assessment Panel assessing the application.
	Or
	Outline how the applicant is addressing concerns raised in the objection.
	Or
Award-Holder	Request to withdraw, amend and resubmit the application to take account of the new information provided in the objection.
	Clearly set out the grounds on which the award-holder considers the new information provided in the objection to be immaterial to its eligibility to continue to hold an award (for example actions have been developed to address the outcome of an employment tribunal or an OIA ruling).
	Or

	Outline how the award-holder is addressing the new information provided in the objection in its Charter Action Plan or through a relevant enhancement or improvement plan.
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8.2 Review of Representations Received

- 8.2.1 The Head of Charter (or equivalent role), or their delegated nominee, will review the representations received (if any) from the applicant/award-holder and will consider whether any of the new information provided in the objection is material, in the light of representations received, to the applicant's case for an award/award-holder's eligibility to continue to hold an award.
- 8.2.2 In cases where representations are received from an applicant outlining relevant enhancement plans / actions in progress, the applicant may be invited to withdraw and revise their application in order to include details of these prior to assessment.
- 8.2.3 Upon conclusion of the review, the Head of Charter (or equivalent role), or their delegated nominee, will make a recommendation to the Deputy Director of Inclusive Institutions in respect of whether the new information and representations should be shared with an Assessment Panel.
- 8.2.4 The Deputy Director of Inclusive Institutions will consider the recommendation of the Head of Charter (or equivalent role), or their delegated nominee and will make the decision to share none / some / all the new information and representations. This decision is final.
- 8.2.5 In cases where representations are received from an applicant outlining relevant enhancement plans / actions in progress, the applicant may be invited to withdraw and revise their application in order to include details of these prior to assessment
- 8.2.6 The Head of Charter (or equivalent role), or their delegated nominee, will communicate the outcome, including the rationale, in writing to the applicant/award-holder and to the person(s) who raised the objection within 30 working days of receipt of the applicant's/award-holder's representations and any further clarifications answered.
- 8.2.7 If this decision is likely to be delayed, Advance HE will communicate the updated timeframe to the applicant.

8.3 Convening an Assessment Panel (Applicants)

- 8.3.1 Following the review of representations received, the assessment processes will resume, and an Assessment Panel will be convened, constituted in accordance with the relevant terms of reference for Equality Charters Panels.
- 8.3.2 The Assessment Panel will be supported by the Head of Charter (or equivalent role), or their delegated nominee, who will act in an advisory capacity and will not be involved in the decision-making.

8.3.3 The Assessment Panel will receive:

- The application, original or revised, as determined appropriate through the review of the objection and the representations. Revisions will be clearly indicated to the Assessment Panel.
- The new information outlined in the objection, including where appropriate the objection received which is redacted to remove the source, as determined appropriate through the review of the objection and the representations.
- In the absence of a revised application, representation/s from the applicant received (if any) within the specified 10-day period.

8.3.4 The Assessment Panel will review the documentation provided and with due regard for representations (if any) from the applicant, will decide if the objection is material to the applicant's eligibility for an award, and recommend an outcome in accordance with the criteria and guidance for Assessment Panels.

8.3.5 The Head of Charter, or their delegated nominee, will communicate the outcome and explanation for the decision within 10 working days of the Panel meeting, in writing, to the applicant and to the person(s) who brought the new information to the attention of Advance HE raised the objection, the named contact as per the submitted objection.

8.4 Convening an Objection Panel (Award-Holders)

8.4.1 An Objection Panel will normally be convened no later than 25 working days from the deadline for the submission of representations.

8.4.2 The Objection Panel will be comprised of four members of the relevant Equality Charter's trained panellists, including a Chair and three Reviewers and one member of the respective Governance Committee.

8.4.3 They will be supported by the Head of Charter (or equivalent role), or their delegated nominee, who will act in an advisory capacity and will not be involved in the decision-making.

8.4.4 The Objection Panel will receive:

- The application on which the award was conferred.
- The new information provided in the objection, including where appropriate the objection received which will be redacted to remove the source, as determined appropriate through the review of the objection and the representations.
- Representation(s) from the award-holding unit received (if any), including any relevant enhancement or improvement plans where appropriate.

8.4.5 The Objection Panel will review the documentation provided and with due regard for representations, if any, from the award-holding unit, will decide if the new information provided in the objection is material to the award-holding unit's eligibility to continue to hold the award.

8.4.6 The decisions open to the Objection Panel, and outcomes arising therefrom are:

Outcome	Recommendation
The new information provided in the objection is not material to the award-holding unit's eligibility to continue to hold the award.	The current award validity is unchanged. This is the likely outcome in cases where, in response to the invitation to submit representations, the award-holder provides evidence of an appropriate enhancement plan / actions in progress.
The new information provided in the objection is material to the award-holding unit's eligibility to hold an award.	The Objection Panel can decide to: a. Maintain the award with conditions. b. Lower the award (e.g. Silver to Bronze). c. Lower the award, with conditions. d. Withdraw the award.

8.4.7 The decision of the Objection Panel is final.

8.4.8 The Head of Charter (or equivalent role), or their delegated nominee, will communicate the outcome and an explanation for the decision, within 10 working days of the Assessment Panel meeting, in writing, to the award-holding unit and to the person(s) who brought the new information to the attention of Advance HE, the named contact as per the submitted objection. If specified conditions are attached, the communication will provide details on how these conditions, including any timeframes, are to be met.

9 Recording & Monitoring of Objections

9.1 The Assessment Delivery Team (Charters) is responsible for keeping a record of each objection, including:

- The grounds on which the objection is based.
- The outcome of the objection and the review of representations.
- If the objection is upheld, the outcome of:
 - i) for objections to applications, the assessment panel, or
 - ii) for objections to awards, the Objections Panel.

- 9.2 The respective Governance Committee and the Quality and Impact Committee will receive an annual report on objections summarising the information above.
- 9.3 As part of this annual report, the Head of Charter (or equivalent role) will, where it is appropriate to do so, make recommendations to the respective Governance Committee and Quality and Impact Committee to the:
- Adequacy of advice, guidance and support for Charters' members.
 - Adequacy of development and support for those operating the objection procedures.
 - Effectiveness of the procedures for objections in meeting their aims.

10 Related Documentation

- 10.1 This Policy should be read in conjunction with:
- Charter Principles
 - Applicant Information Packs
 - Panel Terms of Reference

11 Regional Variations

- 11.1 This Policy covers the Equality Charters for Athena Swan UK, Athena Swan Cyprus and the Race Equality Charter; it does not cover the Athena Swan Ireland Charter which can be found in the [Athena Swan Ireland Guide to Processes](#).

12 Additional Information

- 12.1 Advance HE reserves the right at any time to make any variations to and to amend this Policy and any other Associated Policy as it sees fit.

Appendix A: Version Control

Version	Date Issued	Amendments
Version 1.0	August 2023	The Policy for Objections to a UK Equality Charters Award is a new policy which draws on section 1.5 and section 5 of the Equality Charters Guide to Processes (v2 November 2020). Changes of note are: • in order to support clarity, several new sections have been introduced including: 1. Complaints, comments and matters of concern; 2. Policy statement; 4. Definitions; 5. Policy scope; 10. Recording and monitoring of objections; • in order to support clarity, revisions to differentiate (at all stages of the process) between an objection to an <i>application</i> and an objection to an <i>award</i>; • in order to support implementation, the introduction of an objection template (appendix A); • in order to strengthen the quality assurance of decision-making, the creation of two distinct stages (a Review Stage and an Escalation Stage); through the creation of two distinct stages, the responsibility for taking decisions, in cases where the review indicates that the new information may have an impact on an award holder's eligibility for the award, is moved from Advance HE (the Head of Charter) to a peer-review panel (which includes a member of the respective Governance Committee – paragraph 9c).
Version 1.1	December 2023	Reformatting and accessibility.
Version 2.0	December 2025	• Updated roles and responsibilities in line with the new Advance HE structure. • Formatting and grammatical corrections. • Updated processes to reflect lessons learned from previous objections. • Scope revised to include Athena Swan Cyprus and concomitant amendments to processes.

Appendix B: Objection to Equality Charters Application / Award Template

This template is for use by those who wish to submit an objection to an Equality Charters application/award.

Wherever possible, Advance HE requests that interested parties aim to raise concerns about applications or awards and attempt to find a resolution with the relevant applicant/award-holder directly before raising an objection with Advance HE. Where appropriate, Advance HE may refer an objection back to an objector to follow-up via the appropriate complaints/appeals procedure within their institution and/or request the award-holding unit conducts their own investigation into a complaint and, if appropriate, notifies Advance HE of the outcome.

The new information which forms the basis for an objection must be independently verifiable and/or be received from a credible source.

The new information must be materially significant to the applicant's/award-holder's eligibility for the award because it provides evidence that they:

- i. have failed to adhere to or uphold the Charter Principles; and/or
- ii. do not satisfy one or more of the award criteria.

Advance HE will not consider information from anonymous sources, or which requires further investigation.

Please complete sections A, B, C and submit the completed form to the relevant Head of Charter (or equivalent role) via email; Athena Swan UK application/award: athena.swan@advance-he.ac.uk; Athena Swan Cyprus: athenaswancyprus@advance-he.ac.uk; Race Equality Charter application/award: racecharter@advance-he.ac.uk.

Details of the Application or Award which is the subject of the objection	
Institution	
Department	<i>Insert n/a if the application is institution-level</i>

Submission details	
Name(s) of person(s) submitting the objection	
Email address of the contact for the objection If the objection is a collective one, please nominate one person to act as representative and main contact.	
Date of submission	

Objection Details
Rationale for the objection. Please set out clearly the rationale (including reference to, where relevant, independently verifiable sources of evidence) upon which this objection is made. A limit of 1,000 words applies for this explanation. You may append supporting evidence such as a tribunal report. Appendices do not count towards the word limit and should not include further narrative. Please ensure that supporting evidence is cited in the objection with its relevance clearly explained.

Award Objections Policy
Equality Charters Policies

For completion by Advance HE	
Confirmation that the objection has been added to the relevant spreadsheet and the Head of Charter (or equivalent role) informed.	☐

Appendix C: Process for Objections

