

+ Athena Swan impact evaluation

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While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the information presented, any unintentional inaccuracies, errors and omissions remain the responsibility of Advance HE and the report authors.

1 Executive summary

1.1 Context and purpose of the evaluation

The Athena Swan Charter has been a feature of the UK higher education (HE) equality landscape for two decades. Established in 2005 to advance the careers of women in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine (STEMM), the Charter has since expanded in scope to address gender equality across all disciplines and professional groups, and operates as a central part of our equality charters ecosystem. By 2025, Athena Swan had become embedded across most UK universities with activity spanning institutional, departmental and research institute (RI) contexts.

Advance HE commissioned this impact evaluation in 2025 to coincide with the Charter's twentieth anniversary and to provide assurance of its continued effectiveness, sustainability and value for money in a period of significant sectoral change. Since the previous impact evaluation in 2019, the Charter has undergone a major transformation (2020–2021), widening its scope and streamlining processes, while institutions have faced intensifying financial pressures; workforce challenges; and increasingly contested environments for equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) work.

The evaluation was not designed to generate a further major revision of the Charter framework. Rather, its purpose was to:

- + assess the extent to which Athena Swan continues to contribute to its intended outcomes
- + examine whether outcomes are sustained over time
- + consider the efficiency and value for money of participation for members
- + inform whether and how Advance HE and Charter members can best use Athena Swan in the future, including alongside the recently introduced Inclusive Institutions Framework.

The evaluation scope focuses on the UK Athena Swan Charter and primarily examines impacts over the last 10 years, reflecting the period since the Charter expanded beyond STEMM disciplines. It does not cover international Athena Swan work or the Race Equality Charter, which will be evaluated separately, nor does it cover Athena Swan in Professional, Technical and Operational (PTO) units due to the recent establishment of this application pathway.

1.2 Methodological approach

The evaluation adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, guided by a Theory of Change developed by Advance HE with the Athena Swan Governance Committee (ASGC) and Charter members. Quantitative and qualitative evidence was collected and analysed to assess contribution rather than causal attribution, recognising

Athena Swan as a complex, system-level intervention operating within varied institutional contexts.

The quantitative component analysed long-term trends in institutional and departmental membership, award holding, and progression, alongside an exploratory analysis of Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) salary data to examine gender representation at senior pay bands. Cluster analysis was used to identify distinct institutional engagement profiles and to inform qualitative sampling.

The qualitative component comprised structured reviews of a sample of 49 institutional, departmental and RI applications, and 30 semi-structured interviews with institutional leaders, EDI practitioners and Athena Swan leads across Bronze, Silver and Gold contexts. Evidence was triangulated across methods to examine patterns of impact, sustainability and value for money, while explicitly attending to contextual variation and analytical limitations.

1.3 Key findings

1.3.1 Participation, engagement and progression

Athena Swan has moved from limited early adoption to widespread participation across UK higher education

Athena Swan has transitioned from a small initiative involving a limited group of early adopters to widespread participation across UK HE by the mid-2010s, successfully positioning gender equality as a sector-wide commitment. Membership growth accelerated markedly from around 2013, coinciding with stronger sectoral expectations around EDI and the linkage of Athena Swan to research funding eligibility.

Bronze awards continue to dominate across institutions, departments and RIs, reaffirming their role as the primary entry point to the Charter. A growing subset of over one third of institutions and departments has translated participation into more advanced forms of recognition. Progression pathways vary but progression to Silver typically occurs after several years' sustained engagement and is supported by leadership commitment and improved data capability. Gold awards are concentrated among a small number of long-standing members, highlighting that advanced recognition reflects deep institutional change rather than routine progression.

RIs engage in smaller numbers and tend to follow more linear progression pathways and to achieve Silver awards more quickly than universities. Departmental awards constitute the most dynamic element of Athena Swan activity, particularly since the 2015 expansion to arts, humanities, social sciences, business and law (AHSSBL) disciplines, which by 2025 accounted for a third of departmental awards.

1.3.2 Contribution to policy, practice and institutional capacity

**The Charter has driven improvements in
policy, practice, governance and accountability**

Triangulated evidence from award data, HESA analysis, applications and interviews shows consistent contribution of Athena Swan to policy change, capacity building and cultural normalisation across award levels, institutional and disciplinary contexts.

There is strong and consistent qualitative evidence that Athena Swan contributes to **changes in policies and practices** particularly in recruitment, promotion, flexible working, workload allocation and parental-leave arrangements.

Athena Swan functions both as an entry point for departments and institutions beginning structured EDI work and as a mechanism for deepening and sustaining policy coherence in more established contexts. At Bronze level, Athena Swan acts as a catalyst for first-time policy review, formalisation and visibility leading to early gains, such as improved awareness and policy coherence.

At Silver and Gold levels, the emphasis shifts towards consolidation and embedding of policies and practices into routine governance with regular monitoring evidencing improvements in uptake and experience. Gold award holders highlight the use of longitudinal data to refine practice, indicating a shift from compliance-driven change towards continuous improvement.

A central and distinctive contribution of Athena Swan is its role in strengthening **data-driven decision-making**. Across levels, participants described how the Charter legitimises systematic data collection, makes inequalities visible and enables evidence-based action. While data capability varies widely across institutions, Athena Swan has clearly contributed to increased analytical capacity and accountability over time.

The evaluation finds robust evidence that Athena Swan supports the development of **institutional capacity** for advancing gender equality, including governance structures, EDI roles, communities of practice and coordination mechanisms.

The evaluation also finds that, over time, Charter engagement leads to less tangible culture change impacts, such as the creation of networks, safe spaces for raising issues and the legitimisation of dialogue around gender and wider equality issues.

The Charter fosters peer networks and champions within and across departments and institutions that advocate for changes in policy and practice, while communities of practice accelerate the adoption of good practice. The progressive Charter framework provides external accountability and visibility.

1.3.3 Departmental-level impacts

Departmental engagement is helping turn institutional commitments into improved lived experience

Evidence from application analysis and interviews highlights the importance of departmental engagement for translating institutional commitments into lived experience. Departments often act as **sites of rapid innovation**, piloting initiatives on career progression, flexible working, research support and culture change that are later scaled institution-wide. Appropriately resourced and strategically supported departments demonstrate measurable improvements across multiple dimensions simultaneously, including promotion outcomes, research funding success, staff satisfaction and representation in leadership.

However, the extent of departmental impact depends on the degree of autonomy departments hold over policies and processes, and on the strength of institutional coordination and support. Departmental success is most evident where local action is aligned with institutional governance and resourced accordingly.

1.3.4 Long-term outcomes and senior representation

Athena Swan is helping reshape the systems that enable long-term gender equality progress

The evaluation demonstrates the Charter's contribution to gender balance in senior representation, improved career progression across all role types, and the creation of more family-friendly, inclusive cultures. Evidence of Athena Swan's contribution to long-term outcomes is strongest in governance, culture and progression pipelines.

Quantitative evidence shows that Charter participation is associated with **improved representation** of women in senior academic roles, where Charter members have a significantly **lower percentage-point gender pay gap** (16 percentage-point gap) at higher salary bands than non-members (42 percentage-point gap). This finding aligns with existing research that shows a positive association between Athena Swan participation and reduced gender pay gaps.

Qualitative evidence of impact includes transformation in leadership, **improved career progression** for women across the research and academic pipeline as well as for other staff groups, and broader cultural change in family-friendly working and gender equality.

Athena Swan contributes to these long-term outcomes, by structuring and legitimising institutional gender-equality work, and acting as a catalyst for evidence-based action. The implementation of departmental and institutional Athena Swan action plans leads to changes in policies and practices particularly in recruitment, promotion, flexible working, workload allocation and parental-leave arrangements, outreach to address underrepresentation, as well as improved research support and culture change.

Athena Swan's contribution to long-term outcomes operates through sustained, systemic change: reshaping the structures and conditions that enable progress, rather than delivering rapid or uniform shifts in senior representation.

1.3.5 Sustainability and value for money

The Charter sustains momentum and embeds accountability for gender equality work

The evaluation provides strong qualitative evidence that supports Athena Swan's contribution to sustained cultural change, mainstreaming gender equality into everyday practice, and strengthening progression pipelines over time.

Outcomes are most durable where equality work is embedded into governance, workload models and routine decision-making. External accountability through Athena Swan remains **critical for maintaining momentum**, particularly in preventing post-award decline in activity.

Where equality activity relies heavily on the voluntary labour of individual champions it, its sustainability is fragile, underlining the importance of institutional recognition and reward, and embedding, to ensure this work translates into long-term change.

Participants welcomed the Transformed Charter's reduced administrative burden, achieved without compromising its core objectives. They identified time, rather than direct financial cost, as the main investment, and highlighted the importance of recognising this contribution for mid-career staff, particularly women, for whom time is a genuine opportunity cost.

The evaluation finds that perceived value for money is closely linked to institutional embedding and resourcing, rather than award level alone.

Overall, Athena Swan delivers value as a **coordinating and capacity-building framework**, supporting sustained organisational change within a complex policy context.

1.4 Conclusions

The Athena Swan Charter has served as a significant catalyst for gender-equality progress across UK HE, driving widespread policy change, and changes in processes and practices leading to cultural transformation and sustained and measurable improvements in representation and career progression.

The Charter has evolved from a small initiative with a limited group of early adopters to a sector-wide framework with broad recognition and substantial infrastructure. The widespread adoption of membership reflects the successful positioning of gender equality as a sector-wide commitment, while the depth of change achieved by leading institutions demonstrates that sustained, appropriately resourced commitment can deliver transformational outcomes across multiple dimensions simultaneously.

The evaluation also points to variation in the depth of Charter engagement between members, challenges around resources and sustainability, and ongoing gaps in addressing intersectionality and the experiences of diverse staff populations.

Although challenges remain – particularly in relation to workload, data capacity and sustaining momentum beyond award points – participants consistently viewed Athena Swan as a critical mechanism for legitimising equality work, embedding evidence-based decision-making and maintaining external accountability.

The Charter's continued effectiveness will depend on adaptive implementation that responds to changing sector and institutional contexts, emerging equality challenges, and lessons from two decades of experience.

Looking ahead, key considerations include:

- + supporting institutions with differential capacity
- + maintaining accountability while continuing to reduce administrative burden
- + addressing intersectionality without diluting focus on persistent gender inequalities
- + sustaining strategic departmental engagement alongside institution-wide approaches
- + ensuring that the Charter continues to drive genuine cultural transformation rather than performative compliance.

Ultimately, this evaluation finds that Athena Swan's greatest impact lies in its role as a framework and process for continuous institutional self-examination, evidence-based action, and sustained commitment to creating more equitable academic environments - rather than as an endpoint or award to achieve. Institutions that embrace this understanding achieve the deepest and most sustainable progress, embedding equality as a core institutional value that shapes decision-making, culture and practice across all areas of their work.

1.5 High-level recommendations

For Charter members:

1 **Embed Athena Swan into core governance and strategy**

Sustained impact is achieved by integrating equality considerations into routine decision-making, rather than treating Athena Swan as a periodic compliance exercise.

2 **Strengthen workload recognition and resourcing for equality work**

Formal recognition of equality work in workload models, promotion criteria and professional roles is essential to sustainability and to avoiding the reproduction of inequalities.

3 **Prioritise focused, strategic and flexible action plans**

Smaller, appropriately resourced, clearly owned and flexible action plans are more likely to deliver sustained impact than expansive, unfocused and static lists of activities.

- 4 Strengthen data capability and intersectional analysis**
Early investment in data systems and analytical capacity is critical, particularly to support intersectional analysis and efficient and proportional monitoring.
- 5 Use departmental engagement strategically**
Where appropriate, departmental Athena Swan activity is best supported as a driver of local innovation and cultural change, with clear mechanisms for sharing and scaling effective practice.
- 6 Foster and strategically engage networks and communities of practice** Institutions should continue to support and strategically engage staff networks and foster communities of practice of Athena Swan and EDI practitioners, to drive forward policy, practice and culture change.

For Advance HE:

- 7 Maintain emphasis on implementation in the Transformed Charter**
Advance HE should continue to support high-quality delivery, monitoring and evaluation, while safeguarding accountability and momentum.
- 8 Provide targeted support on data systems and proportional monitoring**
Advance HE should expand practical guidance, tools and peer learning focused on data dashboards, intersectionality and stage-sensitive monitoring.
- 9 Strengthen the evidence base on effective interventions**
Advance HE should gather and make accessible further evidence-based case studies to enable learning across institutions and help accelerate change.
- 10 Support sustainable resourcing models for equality work**
Advance HE should promote and disseminate good practice in workload allocation for EDI, professionalisation, efficiency, and embedding of EDI roles and resourcing approaches across the sector.
- 11 Strengthen coherence, efficiency and impact across equality frameworks**
Advance HE should continue enhancing alignment and synergy between Athena Swan, the Race Equality Charter and the Inclusive Institutions Framework, enabling members to develop suitable approaches to EDI within their context while maintaining focus on gender equality

2 Introduction to the evaluation

Established in 2005 to encourage and recognise commitment to advancing the careers of women in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine (STEMM) employment, the Athena Swan Charter is now used widely in the UK as well as globally to address gender equality more broadly, not just barriers to progression that affect women.

Equality charters form a core element of Advance HE's offer in which a majority of its UK members engage. [Advance HE's 2030 Strategy](#) includes a commitment to "Continuously assess and demonstrate the impact of member services ensuring they meet need and add value." Conscious of the increased financial pressures facing universities across the sector, Advance HE's strategy also contains a commitment to supporting members to sustain progress in equity and inclusion within the context of more challenging operating environments.

The last [impact evaluation of Athena Swan was undertaken in 2019](#), and its findings informed the [Independent Review](#) and subsequent transformation of the Charter in 2020–2021. Given these changes, as well as the current, often challenging context for equalities work in higher education (HE), the twentieth anniversary of Athena Swan in 2025 represents an opportunity to reflect on the impact of the Charter as well as its sustainability and value for money.

For the Athena Swan Governance Committee (ASGC) and Advance HE, the evaluation is intended to provide assurance of the continued efficacy of the Charter and evidence to shape the strategy and development of the Charter to ensure it remains fit for purpose.

Given that the Charter already underwent a major review in 2021, Advance HE and the ASGC are clear that the evaluation is not intended to lead to major changes in the Charter framework per se.

Instead, the evaluation is intended, in the first instance, to support members to make decisions about their ongoing use of the Charter in the context of sector financial pressures and the launch of the Inclusive Institutions Framework, as well as to guide how members implement the Charter locally, and how Advance HE can support them to best use it.

In 2024, Advance HE worked with the ASGC as well as a representative group of wider Charter members, to develop a Theory of Change for the Athena Swan Charter to form the basis for impact evaluation (see Appendix 2). Theory-based evaluations are particularly suited to complex interventions – such as Athena Swan – where standard impact evaluation methods may be difficult to implement. They are interested not only in results, but in how interventions contribute to outcomes, where there are multiple pathways for change and a range of contextual factors that may be influencing those outcomes.

Advance HE commissioned the impact evaluation in spring 2025, with the overall purpose of assessing the effectiveness and sustainability of the Athena Swan Charter in achieving its intended outcomes, specifically:

- + assess the impact of the UK Athena Swan Charter
- + assess whether the Charter fosters sustainable approaches to advancing gender equality
- + assess whether the Charter provides value for money in advancing gender equality.

The evaluation focuses on the Athena Swan Charter in the UK, although findings may have implications for the development of the Charter in other contexts. It does not include consideration of the Race Equality Charter, which will be the focus of a separate evaluation in 2026–2027. It focuses primarily on impacts over the last 10 years – that is, since the scope of the Charter was widened beyond STEMM to include arts, humanities, social sciences, business and law (AHSSBL) departments.

Where possible, the evaluation considers the specific impacts of departmental and institutional Charters' work, including for research institutes (RIs). The new application pathway for Professional, Technical and Operational (PTO) directorates was introduced in 2021 and piloted in 2021–2023, and it has not been possible to draw out specific findings related to impact for these units.

Advance HE's Research and Insights team commissioned the evaluation to two researchers with qualitative and quantitative analysis skills and evaluation experience. The main research for the evaluation took place from May to September 2025, followed by data analysis and reporting of findings, from October 2025 to February 2026.

To provide sector oversight and feedback, the Head of Athena Swan convened a small advisory group for the evaluation, consisting of four members of the ASGC and a Senior Advance HE Adviser. The group met three times during the process: to review the evaluation methodology, to feedback on initial findings and to comment on the initial draft of the full report.

Key findings of the evaluation were shared with interested members and stakeholders, in March 2026, during a workshop at Advance HE's annual EDI. Feedback from this session as well as from the ASGC informed the evaluation recommendations.

The following sections of the report describe the evaluation questions and methodology (section 3), including methodological limitations; the quantitative findings (section 4); the qualitative findings from the application review (section 5); and themes arising from key informant interviews (at institutional and departmental levels, section 6). Section 7 triangulates the evidence across the different evaluation datasets to draw out overall findings. Section 8 provides the overall conclusions and recommendations.

3 Evaluation questions and methodology

This impact assessment of the Athena Swan Charter utilised a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach for data collection and analysis (Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2017).

The quantitative phase analysed institutional and departmental membership and award data to identify trends in Charter engagement and award progression.

In addition, we employed an exploratory analysis using Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data to support a comparison of gender pay gaps between Athena Swan institutional members and non-members to evaluate the impact of Athena Swan on senior-level representation.

We also conducted a cluster analysis to support the sample selection of applications for subsequent qualitative analysis.

The qualitative phase comprised an analysis of a sample of 49 applications and individual interviews. The evaluation of applications employed a multi-institutional design structured around the key domains of impact, sustainability and value for money, directly guided by the evaluation questions. Selected from the cluster analysis, we conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with institutional leaders; Athena Swan self-assessment team (SAT) members; EDI practitioners; and departmental representatives from Bronze, Silver and Gold award holders. These interviews explored the extent to which the Charter has contributed to intended outcomes, long-term impacts, policy and practice change, capacity development, departmental outcomes, and contextual influences, as well as barriers and enablers to effective implementation.

The evaluation questions that informed both phases were:

Impact

1. To what extent has the Athena Swan Charter contributed to its intended outcomes?
 - a. To what extent has the Charter contributed to its intended long-term outcomes?
 - b. To what extent has the Charter contributed to changes in institutional policies and practices? Which specific changes?
 - c. To what extent has engagement with the Charter contributed to developing institutional capacities to advance gender equality?
2. How do contextual factors (eg institutional size, range of academic disciplines, resourcing) influence the effectiveness of the Charter in achieving its intended outcomes? What are the barriers and enablers that make the difference between successful and disappointing implementation and outcomes?
3. What is the contribution of departmental awards to achieving intended long-term outcomes?
 - a. To what extent has the Charter contributed to changes in departmental practice and culture? Which specific changes?

Sustainability

4. To what extent are the outcomes achieved through Athena Swan sustained over time after achieving an award?
5. To what extent has Athena Swan contributed to outcomes in such a way that progress will persist even if participation in the Charter ends?

Value for money and efficiency

6. How do the costs and resources required to participate in and implement Athena Swan compare to the benefits and outcomes achieved by institutions?
7. What Charter actions and outputs drive outcomes and are there activities that could be reduced or removed?

The evaluation questions informed both the sequencing and the focus of the methodological design and were explicitly aligned with the Theory of Change.

Questions relating to the extent, distribution and progression of engagement with the Charter, as well as the contribution of departmental awards to longer-term outcomes, were addressed primarily through the quantitative phase, which examined institutional and departmental award data and modelled progression trajectories through cluster analysis. These analyses tested key assumptions within the Theory of Change concerning uptake, maturity and progression over time.

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Questions focused on how and why change occurs (ie changes in institutional policies, practices, culture and capacity), as well as the role of contextual factors, sustainability, and value for money. This qualitative phase enabled in-depth exploration of mechanisms, enablers and barriers across different institutional contexts.

We used the Theory of Change to guide the integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence, allowing us to examine short-term outputs (such as Charter award attainment), intermediate outcomes (such as changes in practice and capacity) and longer-term impacts (such as sustained organisational change) in relation to one another.

Figure 1 illustrates how these phases were sequenced and integrated to address the evaluation questions.

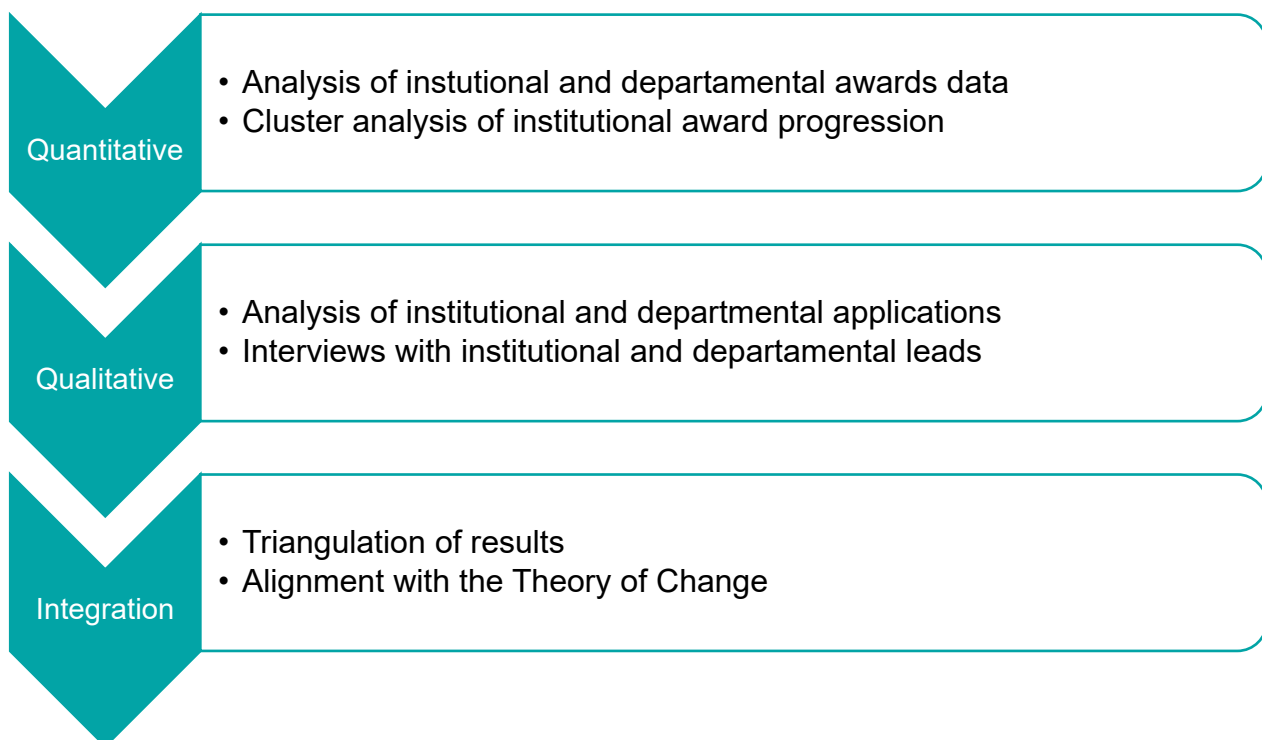


Figure 1. Methodological components of the Athena Swan evaluation

The use of a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design provided a robust and comprehensive framework for evaluating the Athena Swan Charter by combining the breadth of quantitative analysis with the depth of qualitative inquiry. The quantitative phase enabled systematic examination of sector-wide patterns in engagement, award progression and maturity over time; this offered an evidence base for assessing scale, distribution and trajectories aligned with the Theory of Change. By informing the sampling strategy for the qualitative phase, this approach ensured that in-depth analysis was grounded in empirically derived institutional profiles rather than convenience or self-selection.

The subsequent qualitative phase added explanatory power, allowing the evaluation to explore how and why observed patterns emerge in practice, how institutional context shapes outcomes, and how change is experienced at institutional and departmental levels. The

integration of findings across phases through triangulation strengthened the credibility of conclusions; supported analytical generalisation; and enabled a nuanced assessment of impact, sustainability and value for money that would not have been possible with a single-method approach.

The mixed-methods sequential exploratory approach has some limitations that should be acknowledged. While the design supported identification of associations and patterns over time, it did not permit direct causal attribution between Athena Swan participation and observed outcomes, as institutional change is influenced by a wide range of structural, policy and contextual factors beyond the Charter.

Quantitative analyses were constrained by the availability and structure of secondary data, including (for the pay gap analysis) the use of banded rather than granular measures and the absence of differentiation for certain staff groups, which has limited the precision of some findings. The qualitative phase, while providing rich insight into mechanisms and experiences, was necessarily selective and cannot be statistically generalised across the sector. In addition, the sequential nature of the design means that early analytical choices, such as clustering variables and thresholds, shaped subsequent stages of inquiry. These limitations are mitigated, but not eliminated, through triangulation and transparent interpretation, and findings should therefore be understood as indicative of patterns and mechanisms rather than definitive measures of causal impact.

Further details on the methodology are included at Annex 1.

4 Key findings

4.1 Quantitative findings

4.1.1 Descriptive analysis

This section examines trends in Athena Swan membership and award holding over time to understand how engagement with the Charter has evolved across the sector. The analysis examines the extent to which participation has expanded, how awards are distributed across levels, and the extent of progression from Bronze to Silver and Gold. The section situates trends among award holders within a maturing Charter landscape characterised by high levels of participation, measurable progression pathways and persistent disciplinary patterns that shape the distribution of awards.

The trend lines shown in the figures in this section are included as descriptive summaries of long-term patterns in membership. They are fitted across the full observation period to indicate the overall direction of change and are not intended to represent year-by-year movement or predictive trajectories. In contrast, the progression lines reflect observed annual counts and therefore capture short-term fluctuations, including periods of stability or decline. These decreases do not necessarily indicate reduced engagement but often arise from structural features of the Athena Swan process, such as fixed award cycles, award changes (eg from Bronze to Silver) or gaps between submissions. As a result, it is possible for progression lines to show temporary reductions while the trend line continues to slope upward, reflecting cumulative growth and longer-term maturation across multiple award cycles. The trend line should therefore be read as an indicator of overall trajectory, while the progression lines show the organic nature of engagement over time.

4.1.2 Membership growth over time

The institutional membership dataset shows, overall, a strong and steady expansion of engagement with the Athena Swan Charter over the 20 years from 2005 to 2025. In the earliest phase of the Charter (2005–2008), participation was limited to a small group of early adopters, largely research-intensive universities, reflecting Athena Swan’s initial focus on STEMM disciplines and voluntary uptake within a narrow segment of the sector.

Growth remained gradual until 2010, after which there was a marked acceleration, particularly from 2013 onwards. This inflection point aligns with key developments in the Athena Swan timeline, including the consolidation of the Charter at institutional level and, critically, the increasing alignment between Athena Swan participation and external policy drivers.

In particular, the period coincided with the strengthening of expectations around EDI across the HE sector, and with the integration of Athena Swan awards into research funding eligibility criteria for medical sciences by the National Institute for Health Research (this requirement was removed in 2020).

Figure 2 illustrates this acceleration, showing a rapid increase in the number of institutions holding active membership from the early 2010s onwards, consistent with the Charter's transition from a niche equality initiative to a mainstream component of institutional governance and research strategy.

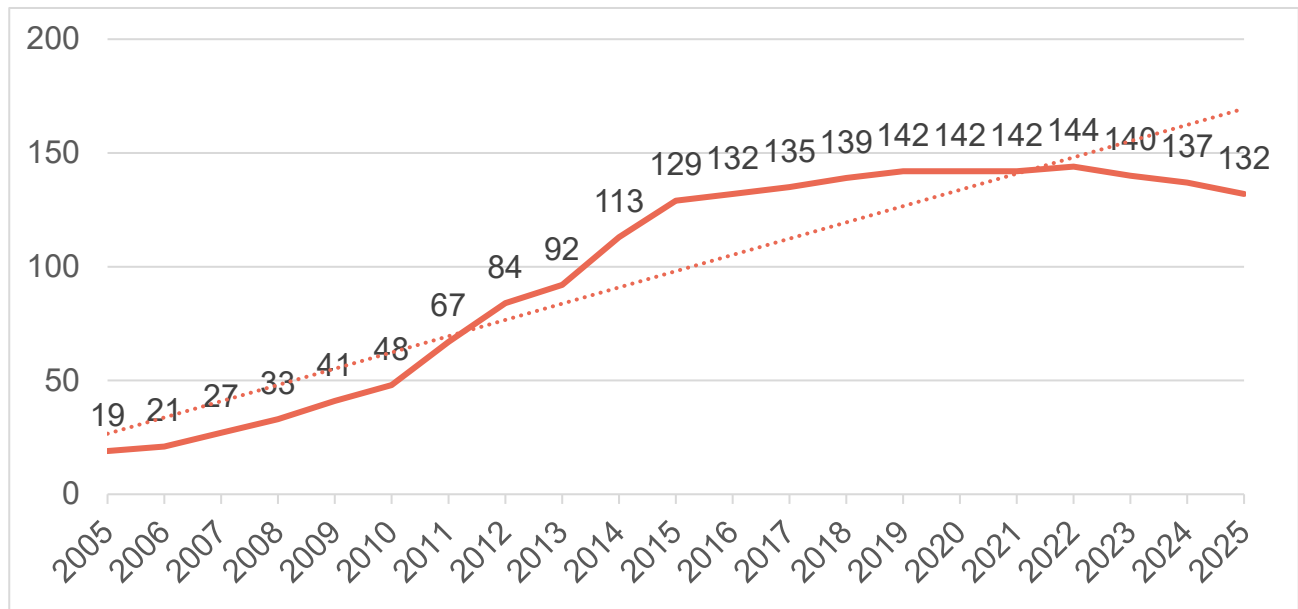


Figure 2. Active Athena Swan institutional members (2005–2025)

By 2015–2016, Athena Swan membership had become widespread across the university sector, indicating a transition from early adoption to mainstream participation. This pattern is consistent with findings from the 2019 Athena Swan evaluation (Graves, Rowell and Hunsicker, 2019), which reported that approximately 70% of UK universities held Athena Swan membership at that time.

Growth continued into the early 2020s but at a slower rate, with membership levels stabilising, suggesting that most institutions capable of, or inclined towards, participation had already joined by this stage.

Disaggregating by institution type (Figure 3), RIs appear in smaller numbers (reflecting their later incorporation into the Charter compared with universities) but display a similar trajectory of increasing uptake from the mid-2010s onwards. Despite smaller overall numbers, the timeline shows a steady increase in RI participation, indicating a growing alignment with sector expectations regarding equality charters and funder requirements.

In terms of membership retention, the analysis shows that the overwhelming majority of institutions remain active members, with approximately 14% of members leaving the Charter. While university membership has remained stable since 2020, RI membership has declined.

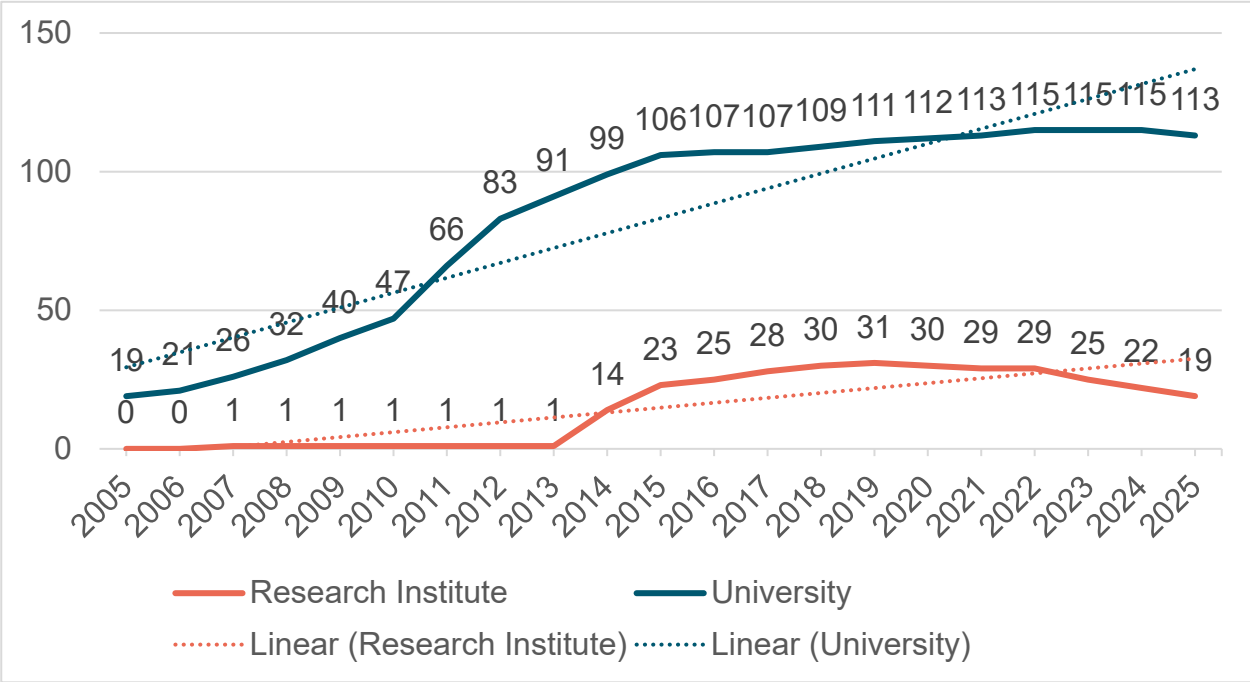


Figure 3. Active Athena Swan institutional members by institution type (2005–2025)

All four nations in the UK are represented in the membership data, with the majority of institutions based in England (Figure 4).

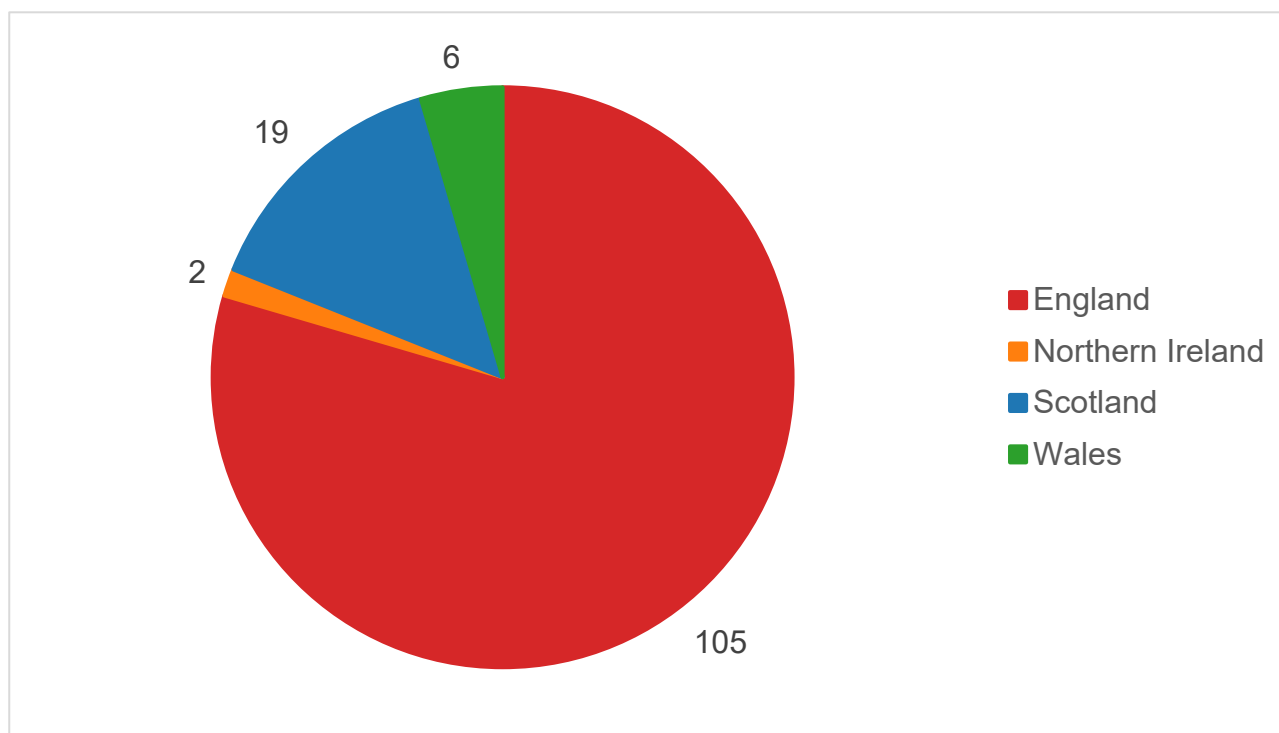


Figure 4. Athena Swan membership by UK nations (2025)

Overall, the analysis reflects a sector in which Athena Swan institutional membership has transitioned from a small group of early participants to widespread adoption across the UK HE landscape.

4.1.3 Award holder trends over time

The awards dataset shows a clear and sustained expansion of Athena Swan award activity across the sector between 2006 and 2025. In the earliest years, only a small number of institutions held awards, reflecting the limited scale of Athena Swan at that stage. From around 2012–2013, award activity increased sharply. By the mid-2010s, the number of university awards had increased significantly (Figure 5), with many universities submitting multiple departmental applications and developing larger portfolios of activity.

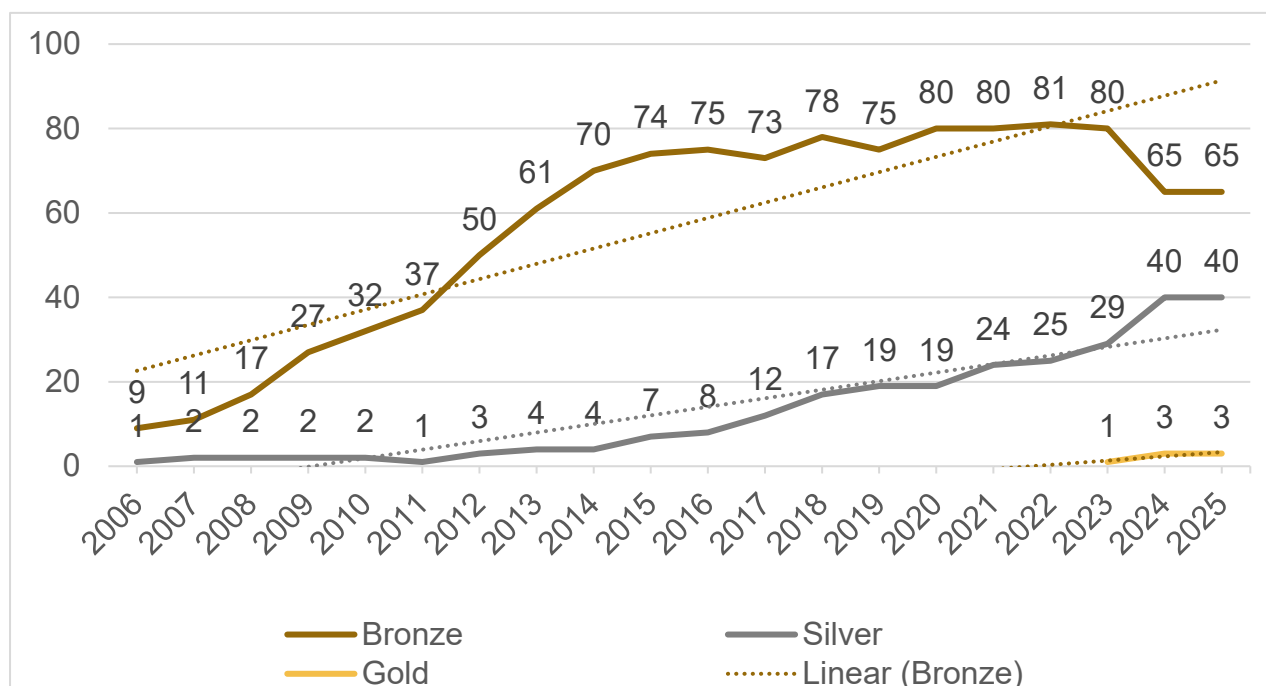


Figure 5. University Athena Swan award holders by level (2006–2025)

Bronze awards remain the most common throughout the period. Institutions and departments typically enter the Charter at this level and remain there for nine years on average. Silver awards begin to appear in greater numbers only after several years of engagement, and their growth is most visible from 2015 onwards, representing over a third of awards by 2025. Gold University awards remain rare and are achieved by only a small number of institutions with long-standing, strategic commitment to the Charter.

RIs represent a smaller but distinct component of the Athena Swan landscape, and their award patterns follow a different trajectory from universities and departmental units (Figure 6). This reflects both the smaller size of the RI sector, and more recent engagement with the Charter - a specific application route for RIs was opened in 2014.

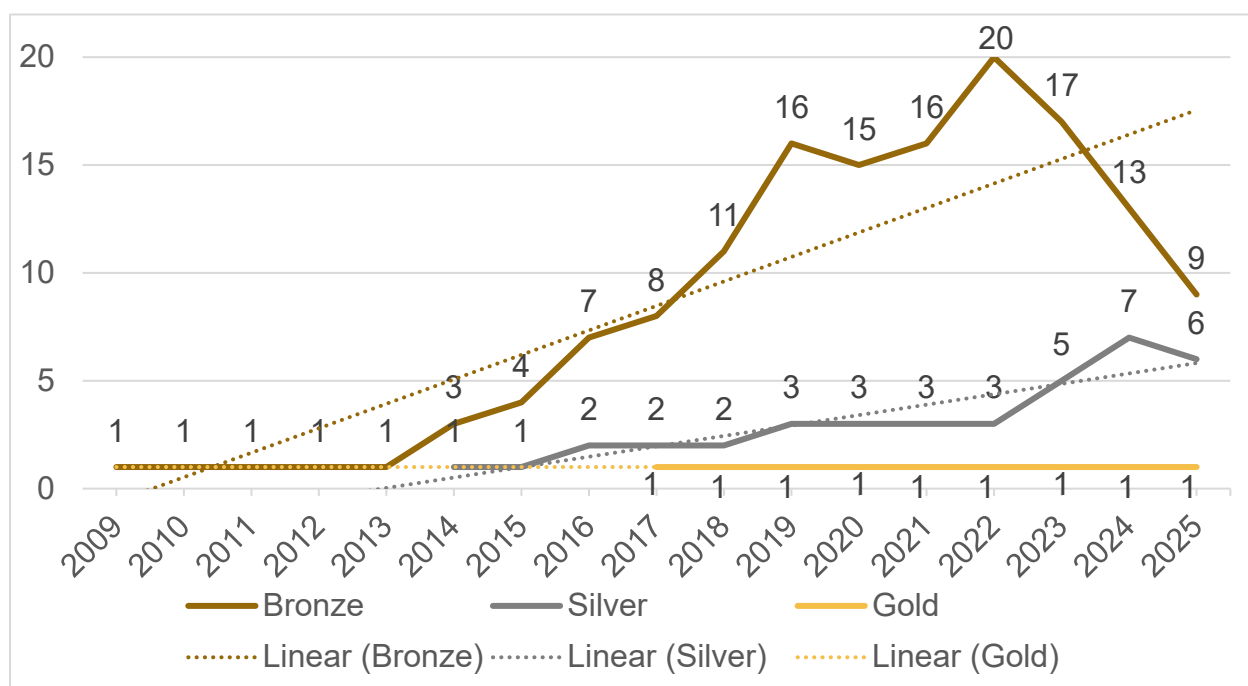


Figure 6: Research institute Athena Swan award holders by level (2009–2025)

Bronze is the most common award level among RIs, with many institutes remaining at this stage for several award cycles. Just over one third (37%) of institutes have progressed to Silver. To date there is only one Gold award holder in the RI group, however the proportion of Gold award holders within the RI group is higher (6%) than the percentage of Gold awards within universities (2%).

Departmental awards form the largest and most dynamic component of the Athena Swan dataset, reflecting the decentralised nature of equality work across academic units within universities. Since Bronze-level departmental awards were introduced in 2010, they have become the entry point and remain the modal award level throughout the full timeline, with many departments holding Bronze across multiple award cycles before progressing further. Silver awards increased steadily from the mid-2010s, particularly in institutions with established Athena Swan engagement, signalling more mature approaches to gender-equality work at the local level. Gold departmental awards are less frequent and are achieved only by a small number of long-standing, high-performing departments (Figure 7).

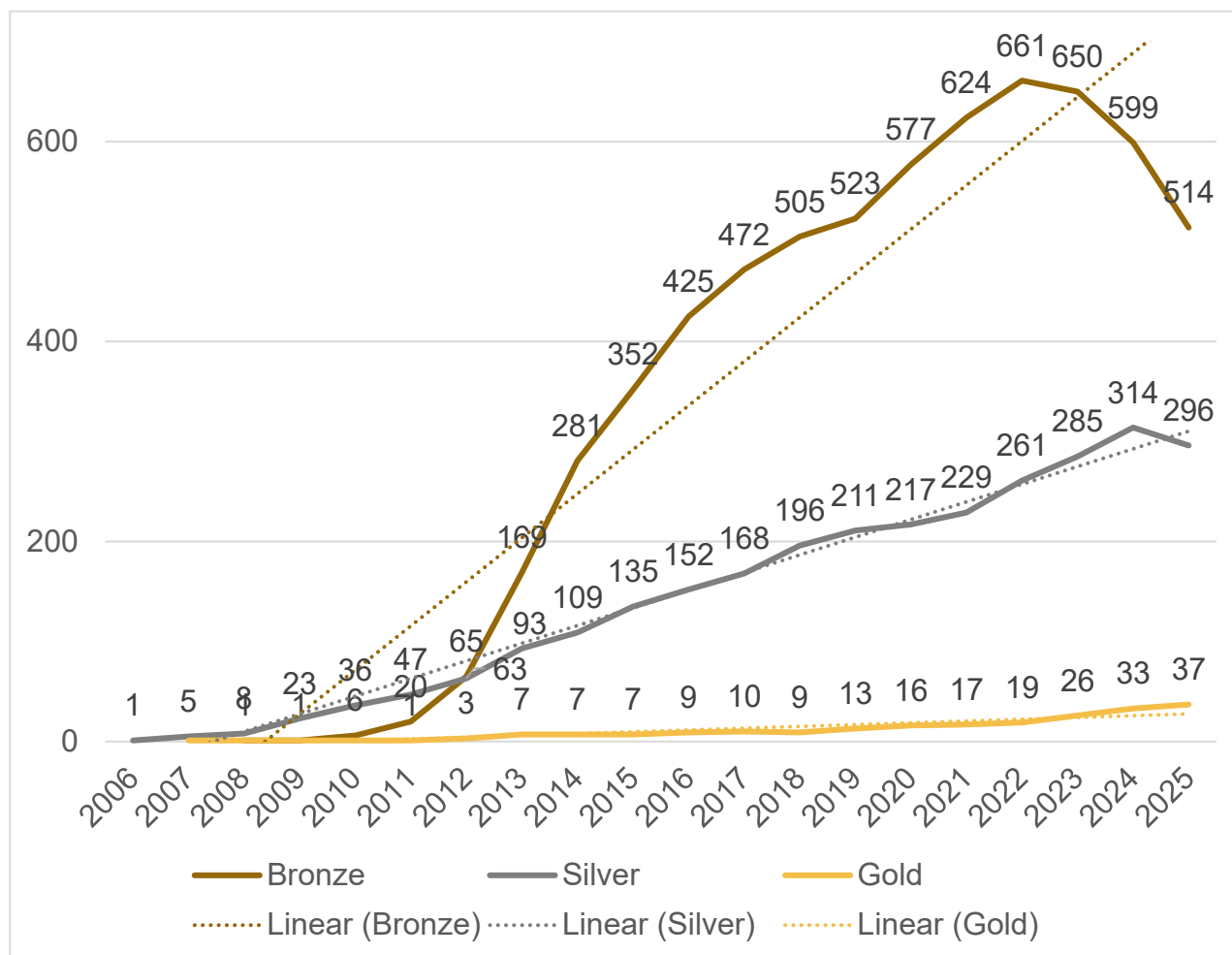


Figure 7. Department Athena Swan awards by level (2006–2025)

The widening of participation eligibility to AHSSBL departments increased departmental participation from 2015 onwards, although AHSSBL awards remain fewer than STEMM awards across the period, reflecting a later and more gradual uptake. The cleaned, non-overlapping timelines show that departmental award activity forms a substantial component of institutional Athena Swan engagement, with many universities submitting multiple departmental applications in each cycle. While STEMM departments continue to account for the majority of awards throughout the timeline, the increasing presence of AHSSBL departments signals a gradual diversification of participation following the expansion of the Charter’s disciplinary scope, accounting for one third of departmental awards by 2025.

Overall, the dataset depicts a growing departmental landscape characterised by sustained Bronze participation, limited but steady progression to Silver, representing more than a third of departmental awards by 2025, and a small but growing number of Gold awards, which remain concentrated within primarily STEMM departments (Figure 8).

Taken together, the analysis of award holder trends demonstrates that Athena Swan has become an embedded feature of the UK HE landscape, with sustained engagement evident across institutions and departments.

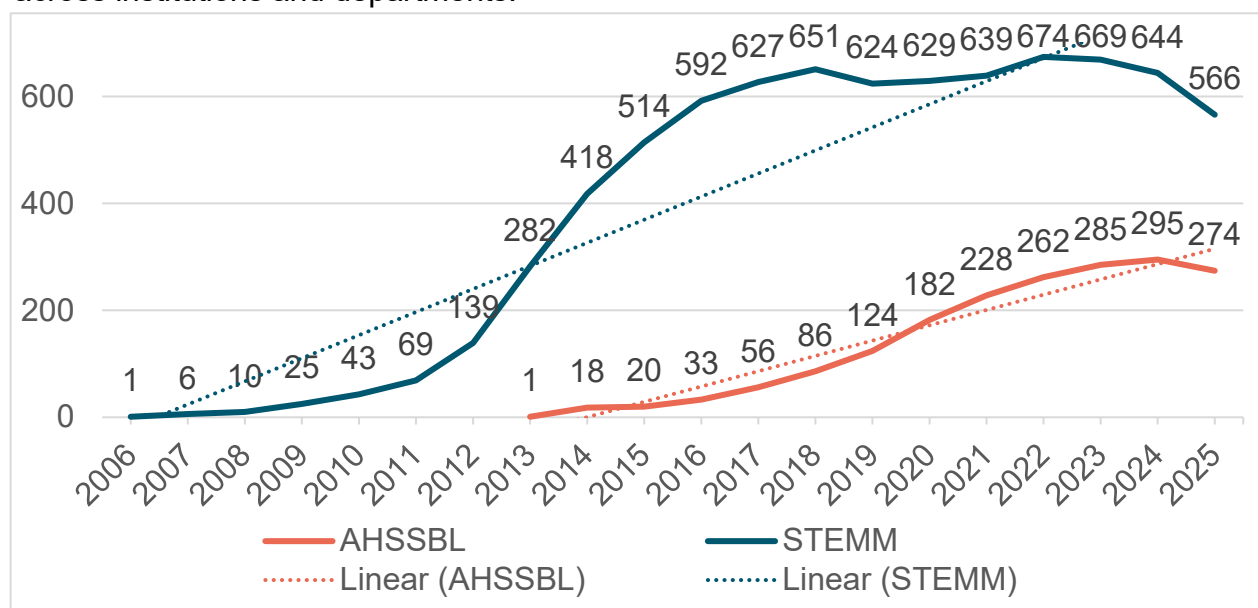


Figure 8. Departmental Athena Swan awards by discipline area (2006–2025)

While Bronze-level awards continue to dominate, a growing subset of both institutions and departments has been able to translate participation into more advanced forms of recognition. At institutional level, particularly, progression beyond Silver remains limited, and Gold awards are confined to a small number of universities and RIs. The persistence of disciplinary differences, alongside variation in the scale and depth of departmental engagement, underscores the importance of institutional context in shaping how Athena Swan is enacted and progressed over time.

4.1.4 Progression through awards

The progression timelines in the dataset show that institutions typically achieve their first institutional Bronze award within approximately two years of joining Athena Swan membership. This timeframe reflects the period required to establish governance and self-assessment structures, develop institutional data capacity, and design and begin implementing action plans in preparation for a first submission (Figure 9). Additionally, this period appears consistent with the procedural and evidential requirements of the Athena Swan application process.

Progression from Bronze to Silver is both slower and more limited than initial award attainment. Institutions remain at Bronze for nine years on average, while Silver progression typically corresponds to institutions with long-standing engagement. Gold-level awards are awarded to only a small number of institutions, and only since the mid-2010s.

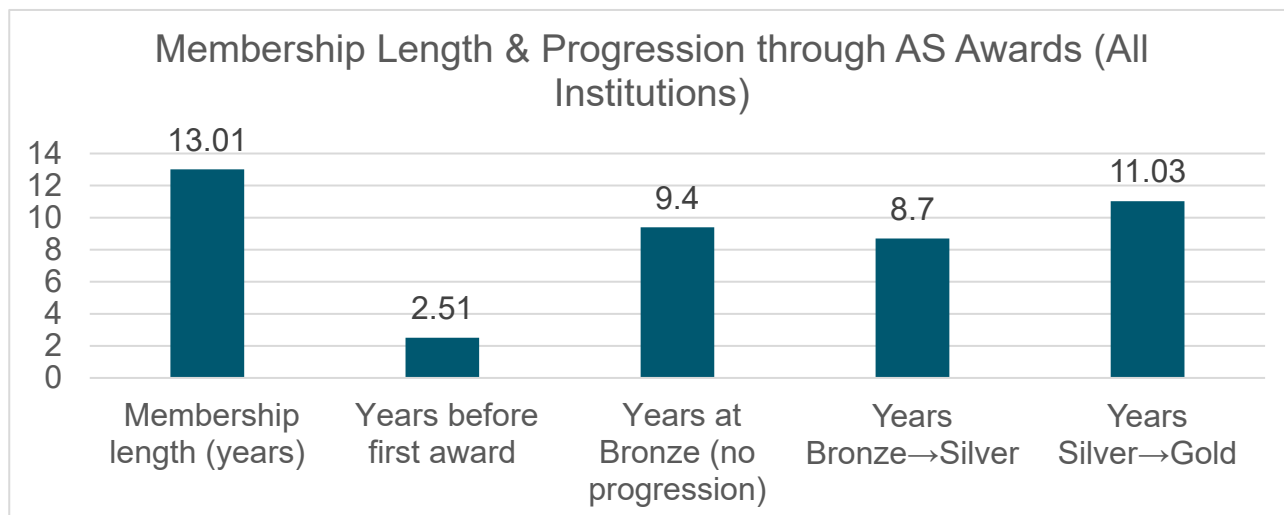


Figure 9. Membership length and progression through Athena Swan awards (all institutions)

The progression timelines and summary statistics presented earlier in this section show that institutions that progress beyond Bronze typically do so after extended periods, with average Bronze-to-Silver transition times substantially longer than the time required to achieve an initial Bronze award. As shown in Figures 5 and 6, fewer institutions move from Bronze to Silver. Those that do tend to have accumulated larger, more sustained portfolios of departmental

Progression from Silver to Gold is rarer still, with very few institutions achieving Gold across the full period analysed. The scarcity of Silver-to-Gold transitions in the dataset indicates that Gold-level outcomes remain exceptional rather than typical, reflecting the higher evidential threshold and longer-term institutional change required.

A comparison of progression timelines reveals important differences between universities and RIs. RIs typically move from Bronze to Silver more quickly than universities, with average transition times of approximately six years compared with around nine years for universities.

Analysis of institutional award progression indicates greater variance among universities than among RIs across all comparable stages of the Athena Swan pathway. Universities show wide dispersion in the time taken to progress between membership, Bronze and Silver awards, and this reflects differences in institutional size, mission, governance structures and resource availability. In contrast, RIs display more compressed and uniform progression timelines. These differences suggest that award progression is shaped not only by Charter engagement but also by institutional form and complexity (Figure 10).

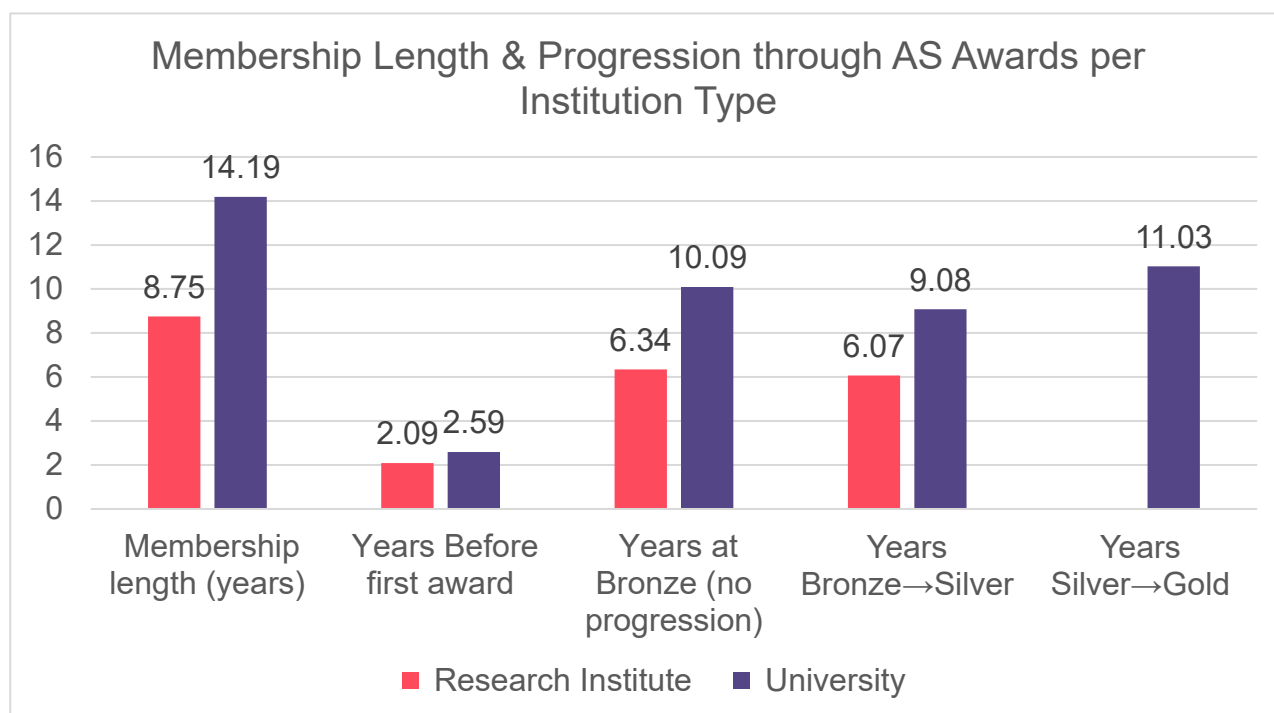


Figure 10. Membership length and progression through Athena Swan awards by institution type

Across the full timeline, the dataset demonstrates that institutional progression within Athena Swan follows a long, multi-year trajectory in which early participation is common, Bronze attainment is widespread, Silver progression is developmental and varied, and Gold is reached only by a very small number of institutions after many years of sustained commitment to the Charter.

Additionally, this analysis of progression patterns indicates that institutions which joined the Charter earlier are more likely to have progressed to higher award levels, reflecting longer exposure and cumulative engagement.

Further work should examine whether changes to the Athena Swan framework introduced in 2015 or 2021 are associated with shifts in institutional progression patterns, with the caveat that structural, policy and contextual factors are not fully captured in award timelines alone.

4.1.5 Gender pay gap

We designed the gender pay gap analysis to assess whether engagement with Athena Swan is associated with differences in gender representation at the most senior academic pay levels, an issue consistently highlighted in sector-level research on gender inequality in HE. A substantial body of literature shows that gender pay gaps in universities are driven not only by unequal pay for equivalent roles, but more persistently by vertical segregation, with women underrepresented in senior and highly paid academic positions (UCEA, 2024; Gamage et al, 2020).

Previous evaluations of Athena Swan have suggested that the Charter may contribute to improved representation of women in senior leadership and research roles, particularly

where linked to funding incentives and sustained institutional action (Ovseiko et al, 2020; Graves, Rowell and Hunsicker, 2019).

Drawing on this evidence, the present analysis focused on representation in the highest HESA salary band (£68,857+), using publicly available HESA Table 17 data ('HE full-time academic staff by HE provider and contract salary 2014/15 to 2024/25'), as this band captures the cumulative effects of promotion, retention and leadership progression over time. We classified institutions as Athena Swan members or non-members, and conducted comparisons across three contract levels (other academic, senior academic and professor), aligning with established approaches in prior sector analyses of gender pay gaps in HE (UCEA, 2024).

This approach allows us to interpret the findings alongside existing research while recognising that the analysis examines representation rather than individual pay and therefore speaks to structural positioning within institutions rather than direct salary differentials.

At the outset, it is important to recognise that the Athena Swan Charter does not require institutions to evidence reductions in gender pay gaps or to report pay gap data in a standardised way. While the framework seeks to support its members to address structural drivers of inequality, particularly the occupational segregation that often underlies gender pay gaps, any observed differences between Athena Swan members and non-members must be interpreted with caution. Accordingly, the analysis that follows is exploratory, and findings should be considered in the context of wider institutional characteristics and sector-level dynamics, rather than attributed solely to participation in the Charter.

Advance HE 2025 data indicates that 132 UK institutions participate in the Athena Swan Charter. Among the 214 institutions listed in HESA Table 17 for 2023–2024, this represents 62% of the sector.

Analysis of the HESA salary data suggests that, compared to member institutions, non-Athena Swan institutions are disproportionately smaller or more specialist providers, including institutions with a narrow disciplinary remit or a strong teaching focus. They typically employ smaller academic workforces with relatively few senior posts.

As a result, their salary profiles often show compressed senior structures, where small absolute differences in staff numbers can produce large percentage variations in representation at the highest grades. These institutions also tend to have fewer large STEM faculties and lower research intensity, contexts in which external incentives to engage with equality charters have historically been less available.

	Athena Swan members	Athena Swan non-members
Other academic	112	102
Senior academic	112	106
Professor	112	48

Table 1. Summary of the number of Athena Swan member and non-member institutions compared across the three contract levels.

Using publicly available HESA Table 17 data, the analysis examined the percentage-point difference between the proportion of men and women in the top band for each institution in 2023–2024 (Figure 11).

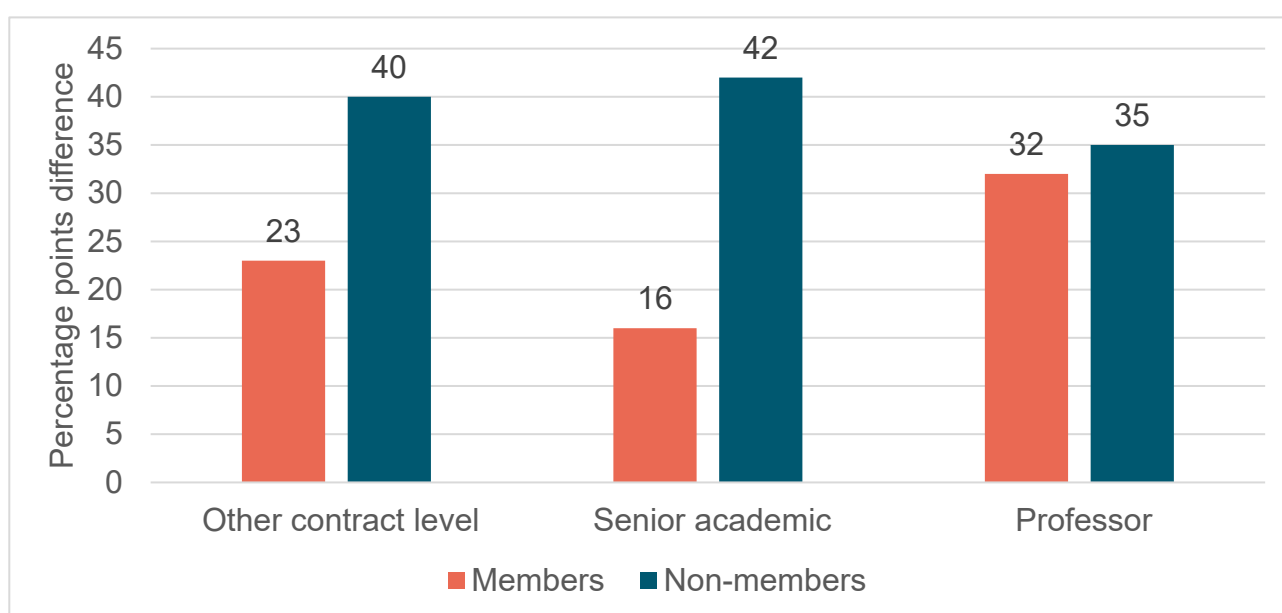


Figure 11. Gender pay gap in HESA highest salary band by Athena Swan membership and contract level.

At each level, Athena Swan members have a lower pay gap than non-members, although the difference is not statistically significant at the ‘Other contract level’ ($p = 0.287$) or ‘Professor’ level ($p = 0.810$). Other published research using HESA data (eg Gamage and Sevilla, 2019) has shown that gender pay gaps are most pronounced at professor level and that institutional interventions, including Athena Swan accreditation, may influence senior pay dynamics over time. However, clear cross-sectional differences between members and non-members are not consistently observed.

At the ‘Senior academic’ level, Athena Swan members have a statistically significantly smaller gender pay gap ($p = 0.001$), indicating that women are better represented in the highest pay band within this group compared with institutions outside the Charter. The findings suggest that Athena Swan membership may be associated with more equitable representation patterns in senior academic roles.

4.1.6 Analytical limitations

The HESA data analysis has limitations, including the use of banded rather than actual salary data, the open-ended nature of the highest salary band, and the inability to control for discipline mix or institutional workforce structure. Furthermore, the cross-sectional approach selected for this analysis focused on most recent HESA salary band data and cannot be generalised to gender pay gap assessment in previous years.

Previous studies using HESA and institutional data have found limited short-term associations between Athena Swan participation and changes at professorial level once baseline differences are taken into account (Armstrong and Sullivan, 2023; Gamage et al, 2020). Quantitative longitudinal studies similarly report that while Athena Swan participation is associated with improvements in gender diversity trajectories, particularly in managerial and non-professorial senior roles, statistically significant effects at professorial level remain limited over short- to medium-term periods (Xiao et al, 2020).

These findings suggest that any impacts of Athena Swan on senior representation may be mediated through longer-term structural and cultural change. The present analysis therefore adopts a cautious, exploratory approach, examining patterns of senior-level representation rather than inferring causal effects.

4.1.7 Final thoughts

Overall, the quantitative evidence presented in this section depicts a mature Athena Swan landscape characterised by widespread membership, long and varied progression pathways, and persistent disciplinary patterning in award distributions, alongside an exploratory indication that Athena Swan membership is associated with a smaller and statistically significant gender pay gap at senior academic level.

Summary of key findings from quantitative analysis

- + Athena Swan participation has grown rapidly from a small group of early adopters in 2005 to **widespread uptake among UK universities** by the mid-2010s.
- + Membership and award activity accelerated notably from around 2013, coinciding with stronger sector emphasis on equality and links between Athena Swan and research funding.
- + Bronze awards dominate across institutions, RIs and departments, confirming their role as the main entry point.
- + Many institutions remain at Bronze for extended periods, indicating that **progression requires sustained effort** rather than occurring automatically over time.
- + Progression from Bronze to Silver typically occurs after six to nine years with over one third of award holders having achieved Silver by 2025; **Gold awards remain rare** and concentrated among a small number of long-standing participants typically acquired after 11 years' engagement.
- + RIs engage with Athena Swan in smaller numbers and tend to follow more linear progression pathways than universities.
- + **Departmental awards represent the largest and most dynamic area** of Charter activity, with many universities building extensive departmental portfolios over time.
- + **STEMM disciplines account for the majority of departmental awards** throughout the period, although participation from AHSSBL disciplines increased after eligibility expanded in 2015, growing to a third of awards in 2025.
- + **Athena Swan membership is associated with a smaller gender pay gap at the senior academic level**, while the smaller gaps at 'Other contract level' and 'Professor' level are not statistically significant.
- + Overall, the quantitative evidence points to **a mature Charter landscape** characterised by high participation, measurable and diversified progress trajectories, and persistent structural differences across institution types and disciplines.

4.2 Qualitative findings: application analysis

4.2.1 Analytical approach

This section reports the findings of analysis of sampled institutional and departmental Athena Swan applications and associated action plans to examine how reported outcomes were articulated, evidenced and linked to specific actions, to explore the mechanisms through which change was expected to occur. This approach allows an assessment of documented changes in policies, practices and organisational culture, as well as the extent to which these changes align with the Theory of Change.

We purposively sampled applications using findings from the quantitative phase, including the cluster analysis, to ensure representation across different stages of engagement and progression, organisational types and levels of maturity to capture variation in practice across different institutional profiles.

4.2.2 Key impacts at institutional level



4.2.3 Leadership representation transformation

Institutions achieved improvements in senior leadership gender balance, representing one of the most visible impacts of Athena Swan initiatives. Twelve out of the 13 sampled university applications (92%) reported improvements in senior leadership gender balance, with improvements occurring over 5–10-year periods.

Female representation among heads of schools and departments increased from minority positions to approaching or achieving gender balance. University Executive Boards also made substantial progress towards gender parity, with some institutions achieving equal representation at the highest governance levels. These leadership changes had cascading effects, enabling broader organisational transformation by placing women in positions to influence institutional culture, policy and resource allocation.

Impact in numbers: key examples of leadership transformation

- + Overall senior management female representation: 42% → 64% (from 13 women to 28 women in actual numbers) (university in Scotland)
- + Female heads of school: 41% → 59% (university in Northern Ireland)
- + Council and main committees: 33% → 39% female (university in England)
- + University Executive Board: 50% female representation achieved (university in England)
- + Professors who are women: 27% (2017) → 31% (2022) (university in England)
- + Black and minority ethnic female professors: 7% → 9% of female professors (university in England)

4.2.4 How institutions achieved leadership improvements

Institutions achieving the most significant senior leadership gender balance improvements employed seven common strategic approaches, typically using multiple mechanisms simultaneously over 5–10-year periods. These approaches required substantial resource investment and executive-level commitment, with the most successful institutions reaching critical mass thresholds of 40%+ female representation in senior roles:

- 1 **Deliberate structural expansion:** creating new senior positions rather than waiting for vacancies, enabling rapid transformation without zero-sum competition.
- 2 **Comprehensive leadership pipeline development:** systematic investment in multiple development programmes creating ‘ready now’ candidate pools.
- 3 **Strategic senior-level EDI appointments:** creating executive-level positions (associate principal, vice-provost EDI) with direct authority and budget control.
- 4 **Governance restructure during organisational change:** leveraging restructuring periods to embed gender balance in new structures from the outset.
- 5 **Rotation systems and term limits:** implementing fixed-term senior roles (typically three to five years) ensuring regular turnover and opportunities.
- 6 **Target-setting with accountability:** explicit numerical targets with regular monitoring enabling progress measurement and course-correction.
- 7 **Intersectional approach to leadership development:** targeted support recognising that women face different barriers based on ethnicity, disability and other identities.

4.2.5 Improved career progression

Women's career progression showed consistent improvement across institutions sampled, with proportions of women professors increasing significantly from low baseline positions to much stronger representation.

Promotion application volumes and promotions success rates for women increased across all staff categories, with women often outperforming men in promotion success rates.

Evidence indicates that this resulted from addressing previous barriers rather than preferential treatment or lowered standards. Women's higher success rates reflected removal of information asymmetries and assessment biases that had previously disadvantaged them.

Academic staff promotions data was tracked consistently and showed the most significant increases in representation across the pipeline, from early career (lecturer to senior lecturer) through to senior positions (professor level).

Professional services staff across all grades also achieved measurable progression, with multiple institutions reporting that female professional services staff achieved grade increases at higher rates than their male colleagues.

Technical staff also benefited from newly created career pathways enabling senior progression that previously did not exist, while research staff showed significant increases in female representation at higher grades.

Impact in numbers: key examples of promotion

- + 87% female versus 78% male professorial progression success rates (university in Northern Ireland)
- + Increased women at highest pay levels from 21% to 27% (university in England)
- + Women's promotion applications increased 59% versus men's 26% (university in Scotland)

4.2.6 How institutions supported women's career progression

The increases in promotions applications and success rates across all staff categories indicate both increased confidence to apply and improved awareness of promotion processes. Analysis of applications suggests that academic staff experienced the most gains and received the most comprehensive monitoring and support.

Mentoring programmes showed very high satisfaction rates among participants, with participants reporting tangible benefits to their careers and confidence.

The most dramatic transformations in women's career progression occurred at institutions that implemented multiple, interconnected support mechanisms including leadership development programmes (mentoring, Aurora Leadership Programme, leadership training), family-friendly infrastructure (enhanced maternity pay, nursing rooms, childcare facilities), career progression support (returning carers schemes, teaching relief, workload redistribution), and dedicated EDI personnel and resources.

4.2.7 Flexible working transformation

Flexible working emerged as a game-changing policy intervention across multiple universities, with transformational impact on both uptake and satisfaction. Formal flexible working arrangements increased, with the majority taken by women, which addressed long-standing barriers to combining careers with caring responsibilities. Maternity return rates reached very high levels at supportive institutions, demonstrating that cultural change translated into practical support during critical career transitions

Impact in numbers: key examples of increase in formal flexible working arrangements

- + 79% women, 21% men taking up new flexible working arrangements (university in Scotland)
- + 70% of flexible working applications came from women (university in Scotland)
- + 100% maternity return rate showing that flexibility enables career continuation (university in England)

Institutions implemented comprehensive agile working policies, moving beyond informal arrangements to systematic entitlements. Importantly, senior leaders personally using flexible working arrangements – rather than just permitting them for others – legitimised these practices and demonstrated their compatibility with high performance and leadership responsibilities, fundamentally changing institutional culture around work patterns.

Staff satisfaction with flexible working improved substantially at institutions that enhanced their flexible working policies. Staff sense of belonging reached high levels, indicating that equality initiatives created welcoming environments rather than merely changing policies

4.2.8 Continued gender pay gap reduction

Measurable improvements occurred in gender pay gaps, though progress was often slower than in other areas and this remains an ongoing challenge.

Of the 13 applications analysed, 11 featured targeted actions or data related to gender pay gaps, of which 6 demonstrated clear measurable improvements ranging from 3 to 7 percentage points (representing 20–50% reductions) (Table 2).

Professorial gender pay gaps reduced substantially at some institutions, addressing inequalities at the highest academic level where disparities were most pronounced.

Metric	Result
Applications analysed	13
Featured pay gap actions/data	11 (85%)
Clear measurable improvements	6 (46%)
Average reduction (where quantified)	3–7 percentage points
Average % improvement	20–50% reduction from baseline
Typical timeframe for improvements	3–12 years
Range of improvements	-2.6 percentage points (smallest) to -7 percentage points (largest)

Table 2: Summary data on pay gap outcomes

Common success factors among institutions achieving improvements in gender pay gaps included targeted senior-level interventions, rapid coordinated response mechanisms, representation improvements at higher pay levels and sustained 5–10-year commitment.

However, pay gap reduction remains challenging due to historical recruitment patterns, career interruptions, and the time lag between policy changes and their reflection in pay statistics.

4.2.9 Network and community building

Across the applications sampled, staff equality networks emerged as powerful drivers of cultural change, creating peer support and collective advocacy, helping increase engagement and shape policies and foster a sense of belonging (Table 3). Networks grew in membership and diversity of focus, and covered carers, parents, women in specific career stages and other identity groups. Parents' networks and community initiatives provided both practical support and cultural change by normalising conversations about work–life integration.

The expansion from single networks to multiple active networks demonstrated the maturation of equality infrastructure and recognition of diverse needs. These networks created spaces for honest conversations, peer mentoring and collective problem-solving that formal institutional structures could not replicate.

Institution	Networks established	Membership scale and reach	Measurable impact
A	Six networks: carers' (2016), LGBTQI+ (2020), women's staff (2022), disabled and neurodiverse (2022), race equality (2022), parents' (2023)	Carers: 340+; LGBTQI+: 240+; disabled and neurodiverse: 40+; race equality: 40+; parents: 30+	Policy consultation rights granted, trans student disclosure +159% (n = 56 → 145), networks influence institutional decisions
B	Women's staff network	400+ staff/students	Policy influence achieved, secured £100k annual period product investment (83% value scheme, 65% report financial benefit)
C	Parents' network (2017+)	Not specified	Normalising parenthood conversations, nursery expansion, 107 period product machines campus-wide
D	Staff parents' network (2019), informal networks	149 leadership programme participants, 93 mentoring participants	Staff reported supportive culture for childcare, 53 caring fund recipients (89% women, £37k distributed)
E	Four diversity networks	Not specified	Contributed to 76% staff sense of belonging, comprehensive policy suite (EDI, menopause, fertility leave, carers' passport)
F	Multiple career-stage networks	50 mentor–mentee pairs annually	84% mentees reported benefits (seven-year evaluation), 53% female academic mentees progressed in careers
G	Multiple networks	150+ carers' fund recipients	Contributing to 100% academic maternity return rate (v 78% sector group average)
H	Development networks	Not specified	503 women (35%) achieved grade increases v 24% men
I	Multiple networks	47 departmental communities	Contributing to 82% staff recommending as workplace (v 75% national benchmark)
J	Student–staff partnerships	Not specified	Student-led initiatives scaled university-wide, 90% flexible working satisfaction; 2,700 pronoun badges distributed

Table 3. Summary of the impact of networks and community building at a range of institutions.

4.2.10 Data-driven decision-making

Institutions developed sophisticated data collection and analysis systems that enabled targeted, evidence-based interventions. Regular monitoring with systematic reporting cycles created institutional accountability while identifying emerging problems early.

Data analysis examined how gender intersected with ethnicity, disability, caring responsibilities and other protected characteristics, and revealed inequalities that gender-related metrics alone would miss. Policy development drew on multiple evidence sources – staff surveys, outcome tracking, focus groups and comparative benchmarking – ensuring interventions addressed actual lived barriers rather than assumed problems.

Summary of key findings from institutional applications

- + **Leadership transformation:** majority of institutions achieved significant increases in female senior leadership (heads of schools/departments, Executive Boards) moving from minority positions towards gender balance through deliberate strategies including creating new positions, developing leadership pipelines and setting targets with accountability
- + **Career progression:** substantial increases in promotion applications and success rates across all staff categories; women often achieved higher success rates than men due to removal of information asymmetries and assessment biases, not lowered standards; comprehensive support systems implemented including mentoring, leadership development and family-friendly infrastructure
- + **Flexible working transformation:** substantial increases in formal arrangements (majority taken by women), improved staff satisfaction and very high maternity return rates; senior leaders personally using flexible working legitimised practices institution-wide, demonstrating compatibility with high performance and leadership
- + **Pay gap reduction:** nearly half of institutions demonstrated measurable progress (typically 3–7 percentage-point reductions over 3–12 years), though slower than other areas due to structural factors and time lags between policy changes and pay outcomes
- + **Network and community building:** staff equality networks grew dramatically, maturing from single to multiple networks covering diverse identities; provided peer support, policy influence and collective problem-solving spaces that formal structures could not replicate

- + **Data-driven decision-making:** sophisticated data infrastructure enabled evidence-based interventions with intersectional analysis revealing hidden inequalities beyond gender metrics; regular monitoring created accountability and early problem identification

4.2.11 Key impacts at departmental level



4.2.12 Career progression

Departments improved career progression, with an increase in the volume of promotions applications from female staff. Female applicants sometimes experienced a higher promotion success rate than male colleagues, contributing to a shift in career patterns. The most dramatic example showed a tripling in numbers of female senior lecturers and doubling in numbers of female readers through systematic mentoring and support.

These successes were underpinned by innovative departmental interventions (see examples in Table 4) including promotion spreadsheet tools enabling self-evaluation, promotion clubs operating in small peer groups, and targeted mentoring schemes that staff reported as more beneficial than formal performance reviews.

Department type – geographical region	Intervention
Department of Engineering, Physical and Mathematical Sciences – university in England	• Promotion spreadsheet tool • Promotion clubs • ‘Ambitious Women’ groups • Extended leave checklists • ‘Above and Beyond’ recognition system • Effective keeping-in-touch arrangements
Department of Life Sciences – university in England	• Promotion spreadsheet tool enabling self-evaluation against clear criteria • Integration with annual appraisals and line manager feedback • Mentoring scheme implementation
Department of Science and Engineering – university in Scotland	• Aurora Leadership Programme – enhanced access • Systematic mentoring infrastructure • Maternity support system • Substantial EDI budget • Research application support systems

Table 4. Summary of interventions to support career progression at three different institutions.

4.2.13 Research income and success in funding excellence

Departments improved research funding outcomes through systematic support for women (eg seed funding and mentoring schemes), increasing their confidence in applying for research grants, and success in research applications and grant-writing.

Research support roles were introduced, creating improvements in funding success across all staff levels, with particularly strong impacts for female staff at mid-career levels.

Impact in numbers: key examples of research funding success

- + 40–48% of grants to female investigators sustained over four or more years. (Department of Biology, university in Scotland)
- + Seed funding grants: 25% → 80% female success (55 percentage-point increase) (Department of Surgery and Cancer, university in England)
- + Female grant values higher than male in three out of four years (Department of Civil Engineering, university in Scotland).

4.2.14 Workplace culture transformation

Departments achieved fundamental shifts in workplace culture, measurable through increases in staff satisfaction levels with working conditions (eg workload), more robust policies, and workplace culture changes, moving beyond simply compliance to genuine transformation.

The most successful departments demonstrated significant cultural change, with staff perception of workplace quality increasing substantially, and increased career development opportunities.

Impact in numbers: key examples of culture change

- + Career development opportunities increased 40% → 92% (School of Psychology, university in Northern Ireland)
- + 100% maternity return with significant career progression (School of Pharmacy, university in Northern Ireland)
- + Staff feeling valued: 20% → 59% (School of Life Sciences, university in England)

Some departments achieved near-perfect maternity return and retention rates through comprehensive support systems, with all, or nearly all, flexible working requests approved. Most reviewed departments embedded EDI principles as standing agenda items on all committees and achieved gender balance across decision-making bodies, ensuring female voices in all strategic and operational processes.

4.2.15 Leadership representation and job-sharing innovation

Gender parity was achieved on departmental Senior Management Boards.

Impact in numbers: key examples of female leadership representation

- + 66% female Deans Team representation (Department of Engineering and Physical Sciences, university in England)
- + 50% female representation on Senior Management Board (School of Surgery and Cancer, university in England)

Furthermore, some departments achieved their first part-time promotions to professor and first promotions to professor for education-focused staff, breaking traditional barriers and recognising diverse forms of academic contribution.

4.2.16 Widening participation and outreach impact

Departments developed and implemented outreach programmes with measurable impact on pipeline development and participation from underrepresented groups. Departmental programmes engaged hundreds of girls annually from widening access backgrounds, with participants progressing to STEMM degrees at high conversion rates.

Substantial increases occurred in postgraduate research applications and acceptances from female students while maintaining or achieving female student majorities in undergraduate programmes in some disciplines.

Impact in numbers – key examples of outreach and widening access

- + **engaged hundreds of girls annually:** ranging from 100 to 500+ participants per programme
- + **targeted widening access backgrounds:** 40–75% from underrepresented groups
- + **achieved high conversion rates:** 88% acceptance, 23% overall conversion, 83% progression
- + **successfully enrolled students from areas of multiple deprivation:** three explicitly documented, 12% Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) 0–20 achieved (0–20 is the 20% most deprived areas)

4.2.17 Sustained, evidence-based improvement

Departments demonstrated that transformation was sustained over multiple years through systematic data collection, action planning and accountability mechanisms. The departments achieved high completion rates of action plan objectives with the majority rated as fully achieved, showing effective implementation and monitoring. Success rates on promotion applications for women improved consistently and application rates increased, showing sustained rather than one-off success. Departments embedded Athena Swan principles as standing agenda items in all management meetings, ensuring ongoing consideration in decision-making rather than separate equality workstreams.

Summary of key findings from departmental applications

- + Focused, appropriately resourced and systematically implemented equality initiatives can achieve **transformational change at the local level**, where staff and students directly experience institutional culture.
- + Departmental successes were characterised by **innovation in support mechanisms**, with creative solutions tailored to specific disciplinary contexts and challenges.
- + Departments achieved **measurable outcomes across multiple dimensions simultaneously**, including representation, research income, student outcomes, cultural indicators and staff satisfaction.
- + The most successful departments combined **structural changes in policies and processes** with **cultural interventions** addressing attitudes and behaviours, supported by adequate financial investment.
- + They recognised that different staff groups require tailored interventions (eg early-career researchers, mid-career staff, senior academics, professional services staff, and students).
- + Departments created multiple pathways for progression and contribution, enabling diverse staff to thrive rather than relying on narrow definitions of success.
- + Critically, departments **moved beyond policy compliance** to genuine cultural transformation.
- + Local leadership commitment, peer support mechanisms, transparent processes and systematic data collection created **powerful change even within larger institutional contexts** that might be slower to transform.
- + Departmental-level action is **essential for translating institutional policies into lived experiences** of equity and inclusion for staff and students.

4.3 Qualitative findings: interviews

4.3.1 Institutional and departmental impacts

The following section presents a thematic analysis of institutional and departmental impacts across Bronze, Silver and Gold applicants. The analysis draws on interview evidence across institutional and departmental contexts, highlighting where experiences were shared and where they differed by level of award, institutional maturity or resource capacity. Bronze, Silver and Gold awards are understood as points along a developmental continuum, with differences reflecting depth of embedding, consistency of implementation, and sustainability of change rather than fundamentally distinct types of impact.

Theme 1: changes in policies and practices

Athena Swan as a catalyst for policy development and consolidation

Across all award levels, interviewees described Athena Swan as a key catalyst for institutional policy change, though the nature of this change differed by award level. Bronze award holders most often described Athena Swan as prompting initial policy review, formalisation and visibility, while Silver and Gold awardees emphasised institution-wide consolidation and standardisation of policies.

Interviewees across contexts identified similar policy domains influenced by Athena Swan engagement, including academic returner schemes, family-friendly policies, flexible working, menopause and neonatal care, workload allocation, and core meeting hours. Bronze institutions more frequently framed these as newly introduced or recently formalised, whereas Gold institutions described them as embedded, monitored and routinely reviewed:

“I can definitely pinpoint policies that stemmed from the commitment we made through Athena Swan.”

Departmental interviews reinforce this distinction, showing that early-stage policy development in Bronze institutions often begins with local pilots or faculty-level action plans (eg revised flexible working practices or clearer parental leave guidance), which are subsequently adopted or standardised at institutional level:

“Some of them were relatively easy wins. So people not knowing about certain processes and policies within the university, particularly around things like parental leave or what kind of support is available. So it was really useful to give everybody in the department a really good handle on a) what was available to them and b) if they didn’t know where to find it, what kind of forums are available within the university.”

In Silver and Gold institutions, departments described these policies as already ‘hardwired’ into routine practice, with local effort focused on implementation quality rather than policy creation.

The analysis suggests that Athena Swan functions both as an entry point for departments and institutions beginning structured EDI work and as a mechanism for deepening and sustaining policy coherence in more established contexts.

Recruitment, promotion and transparency

Interviewees at all award levels reported changes to recruitment and promotion practices associated with Athena Swan, including the introduction of inclusive recruitment toolkits, anonymised shortlisting, gender-neutral job advertising and increased scrutiny of committee composition. However, the way interviewees experienced and described these changes varied by institutional maturity.

Bronze institution award holders most often characterised these developments as procedural introductions, frequently emphasising that engagement with Athena Swan had prompted institutions to examine recruitment and promotion practices systematically for the first time. These interviewees perceived Athena Swan as a mechanism that surfaced previously unexamined patterns and enabled targeted corrective action.

In contrast, Silver and Gold institution applicants were more likely to describe recruitment and promotion practices as embedded and culturally normalised, with Athena Swan supporting ongoing refinement rather than initial adoption. These interviewees emphasised accountability, consistency and longitudinal learning:

“It has become normal practice now. For at first it was, “Oh, well, you’re doing that Athena Swan, aren’t you?” ... But now nobody blinks an eye when... When you talk about gender balance and career progression, it has become very much mainstreamed.”

Gold institution award holders highlighted the use of longitudinal data to iteratively adjust practice, suggesting a shift from compliance-driven change towards continuous improvement.

Departmental interview data provides concrete examples of this process, describing how local data reviews undertaken for Athena Swan exposed issues such as ‘scissor effects’ [ie where significantly higher female than male representation at lower levels or grades, is replaced by higher male than female representation at higher levels or grades, forming a ‘scissor’ shape when data is visualised], leading to targeted departmental interventions (eg recruitment checklists). In several cases, these departmental practices were later adopted institution-wide, illustrating upward diffusion from local action to institutional norm:

“There are some surprises that we got from Athena Swan. So when you get the data through, you sort of go, ‘Is that right? Do we really only have one woman who’s a head of department?’ It’s where the data has sort of emphasised something that you hadn’t really noticed in real life. There are other occasions where you don’t necessarily see the people. They work a bit more remotely or you know, they’re not in your day-to-day vision. And getting the Athena Swan data together helps you to go, ‘Oh gosh, I hadn’t even clocked that that was the case’. Where it’s less visible, the data from Athena Swan has helped to drive changes.”

Taken together, these findings suggest that differences in emphasis reflect stages of organisational learning and embedding. Athena Swan appears to function both as a catalyst for initial procedural change and as a framework for sustained cultural accountability as institutions progress.

Data-driven decision-making and awareness

Across Bronze, Silver and Gold institutions, interviewees consistently described Athena Swan as strengthening data-driven approaches to equality work, particularly by legitimising systematic data collection, analysis and monitoring. Participants emphasised that the Charter required institutions to move beyond anecdotal understandings of inequality and engage with evidence in structured and transparent ways.

Several interviewees spoke positively about this shift, explicitly framing data as enabling institutional learning and accountability:

“The data-driven approach, absolutely fantastic.”

“We can measure it. We can measure change.”

Bronze institutions most often described this as a new and challenging development, with Athena Swan prompting the first detailed interrogation of gender representation, progression and pay. These interviewees perceived the visibility afforded by data as both confronting and necessary, enabling them to identify issues that had previously remained obscured.

Silver and Gold institutions, by contrast, were more likely to describe refinement and consolidation of data practices, including the use of dashboards, progress trackers, and longitudinal analysis to assess trends over time. In these contexts, data was perceived not only as a diagnostic tool but as a mechanism for tracking delivery against action plans and supporting sustained accountability.

Departmental interviews deepen this account, illustrating how engagement with granular data during application preparation revealed localised issues (eg uneven workload allocation, progression bottlenecks within specific staff groups), which enabled departments to design targeted interventions aligned with institutional priorities:

“Every time I look at our data and show them where we are... they actually say, ‘Oh, so we need to do something if this is that bad’. Before that they could say, ‘Everything is perfect’. [...] They went and looked at the data and they found out how bad we are.”

While interviewees broadly valued evidence-based approaches, perceptions diverged regarding the proportionality of monitoring requirements. Some participants experienced data collection as empowering and clarifying, while others viewed it as somewhat burdensome or duplicative. The analysis suggests that these differing perspectives reflect variation in data infrastructure and analytical capacity, rather than fundamental disagreement about the importance of data-driven practice.

Taken together, the findings indicate that Athena Swan has played a central role in embedding evidence-based decision-making across institutions, with data acting as both a catalyst for early awareness in Bronze contexts and a tool for sustained accountability and refinement in Silver and Gold contexts.

Cultural change and legitimisation

Across all award levels, participants reported that Athena Swan had contributed to legitimising conversations about gender equality. Bronze institutions often described early cultural shifts, such as increased willingness to talk about inequality:

“There is talk about things. One, we sit on the EDI committee and I had an invite this morning... We’re meeting for coffee because we want to talk about plans... And I thought, yeah, actually those two people would never have met each other.”

On the other hand, Silver and Gold institutions emphasised normalisation and mainstreaming of these initiatives:

“It’s changed the culture of the institution and the various different people and teams.”

“You can go and have a conversation around gender equality in every department now, which you couldn’t have 10 years ago.”

“It gave our department, our institute, a framework to talk about equality. Once your eyes are open to gender inequality, then you start seeing other inequalities.”

Departmental interviews align closely with this pattern, with Bronze contexts describing emerging engagement and confidence building, while Silver and Gold contexts described established expectations that staff would challenge practice, seek guidance and consider equality impacts as part of routine decision-making:

“What we try to do now is... to take the principles of Athena Swan and whenever we’re doing a new policy or a new process sort of go, well, if we were putting this in Athena Swan, you know what, how would we do it? Is there anyone it’s impacting differently. How will it apply to this group of people? How will it apply to that group? So... it’s just affected our general approach to whenever we’re doing something new. Thinking about it, I’m bringing sort of equality and diversity into every day rather than it just being something that you look at every five years.”

The analysis suggests Athena Swan plays a critical role in opening departmental and institutional spaces for EDI dialogue, with depth and reach expanding as institutions progress.

Theme 2: developing institutional capacities to advance gender equality

Capacity building as a developmental process

Interviewees consistently framed institutional capacity for gender equality as cumulative, with Athena Swan acting as both a catalyst and structuring mechanism. Bronze institutions described building capacity through the creation of governance structures, appointment of EDI leads and establishment of basic data systems:

“Actually, our actions from Athena also did support our institutional actions anyway. So I think we did marry them together.”

In turn, Silver and Gold institutions described more advanced integration, including alignment with broader EDI strategies and intersectional approaches:

“So certainly we’ve taken our Athena Swan’s action plan beyond gender. [...] You know, I think the Charter and the evolution of the Charter, it’s, you know, encouraged that wider focus on other protected characteristics.”

While some Bronze interviewees expressed initial attempts to balance gender focus with broader EDI agendas, Silver and Gold institutions were more likely to describe negotiated, strategic integration.

Departmental interviews illustrate how this capacity is enacted locally, describing initiatives such as women in management programmes, structured peer support, revised workload models and manager training, which both respond to institutional priorities and surface context-specific issues that inform institutional strategy.

Governance, networks and communities of practice

Across award levels, interviewees described the establishment of governance structures and networks (eg Swan Champions, EDI committees, communities of practice) as central to capacity building. Bronze institutions often described these as new or emerging:

“But what we’ve also got in place is, and I’m putting this together now as well, is working groups for each charter. So we’ve got themed working groups around students, around research, around promotional and talent and representation and around culture as well as behaviours. And those working groups are chaired by heads of services.”

In turn, Gold and Silver institutions highlighted their role in sustaining institutional memory and scaling good practice:

“We still have this kind of a community of practice now for Athena Swan leads... about three times a year we have a meeting where everybody’s involved and we can... share some good examples of good practice.”

“So we’ve got our community of practice now, which was set up really in part to help that, to facilitate [exchange of practices across departments].”

Departmental accounts complement this, emphasising how these networks facilitate upward communication, cross-faculty learning, and dissemination of successful local initiatives to institutional level:

“We have a cross-institution [group], Athena Swan Chairs and Co-Chairs. We have something scheduled in for Teams meetings every month... So people can sort of join, come in and out and talk about their experiences or their application or whatever’s going on at the moment. New policies, new directives, anything that’s sort of Athena Swan-related go through there and it’s kind of a support.”

The analysis indicates that formal recognition and resourcing of these structures strongly shapes their effectiveness, regardless of award level.

Data infrastructure and analytical capability

Bronze institutions were more likely to describe gaps in data availability and analytical expertise:

“Previously we haven’t been able to go for Silver because [we] haven’t been ready and we haven’t made that progress in terms of the data as well.”

By comparison, Silver and Gold institutions emphasised data refinement and use:

“Initial barriers that we’ve overcome were around data analysis, having accurate data so that we could even identify what the problem was.”

However, all award levels identified intersectional data as a persistent challenge:

“Making sure we don’t spend hours on data collection. Getting the data, particularly for intersectionality, is unbelievably difficult.”

Rather than a binary divide, the analysis suggests a continuum of data maturity, with Athena Swan acting as a driver for progressive development.

Theme 3: factors influencing the effectiveness of the Charter

Resourcing and workload

Interviewees across all award levels identified time and staffing as major constraints. Bronze institutions more frequently described reliance on voluntary labour:

“So it is very much a case of goodwill. This is recognised and we are trying to do something about it. And we have changed the structure of the SAT slightly in terms of governance.”

On the other hand, Silver and Gold institutions reported mitigation through access to professional services support:

“I was working in an office with a professional member of staff who was our data analyst and he would every now and again have a conversation with his line manager and say, ‘I need to do this thing. Can you rearrange my workload so I can spend Friday doing it?’ And they would say, ‘Yes, that’s fine, we’ll rearrange it’.”

Departmental interviews echo these contextual realities, noting that Athena Swan work is often undertaken alongside existing responsibilities, with limited workload recognition, particularly in early-stage or resource-constrained contexts:

“In a small department especially, could also be a larger department now because we have a staff freeze, so someone’s left, they’re not replaced. So someone might be trying to do two jobs, as it were. So there’s definitely a resource challenge there.”

“Everyone trying to reduce the workload and there are so many pressures for everyone, in terms of the workload.”

Nevertheless, even well-resourced institutions emphasised the intensity of Athena Swan work. This suggests that resource considerations are structural, not award specific.

Leadership engagement and culture

Bronze interviewees often described leadership engagement as variable or emerging:

“I do feel like sometimes the submissions are kind of driven by a few key individuals that are really passionate about gender equality rather than it be embedded into, you know, a role within the faculty, eg this is your role, so you take on this.”

Conversely, Silver and Gold institutions emphasised the stabilising effect of sustained senior support:

“You know, we’ve seen increase in senior leadership buy-in and championing gender equality. You know, it’s part of our strategic approach.”

“If you see someone on the senior leadership rolling their eyes when somebody talks about an issue... that cascades very quickly. But if you see senior leadership being visibly supportive ... that too, I think quickly cascades.”

Departmental interviews reinforce the importance of heads of department and Athena Swan departmental leads in legitimising local action and sustaining momentum:

“There’s the head [of] department, there’s also the person that gets appointed to lead the Athena Swan work. If you get the right person then, it progresses, it sails through. You get the wrong department person and I’ve seen this happen – who doesn’t, either doesn’t get it or can’t interact with colleagues terribly well – and the application is a failure really. It comes down to leadership; it comes down to setting an example.”

Across all contexts, leadership behaviour was seen as central to cultural change.

Theme 4: sustainability of institutional change

Embedding and external accountability

Across award levels, interviewees stressed that sustainability depends on embedding EDI within governance, workload models and routine decision-making. Bronze institutions often expressed concern about sustaining momentum without clearer structures:

“There is a five-year cycle currently at the moment, which is very much wrapped up in a lot of work for applications, then a little bit of a period of hiatus and you know, it’s like that kind of relief that we’ve actually been awarded it and then that maybe lasts for six months to a year and then you start to pick up the pieces again.”

Silver and Gold institutions highlighted risks of post-award complacency:

“I think often the activities are sustained. And after an award, I think what can often happen is – I’m seeing a shift in this over time as well. But what has absolutely happened historically and still does happen is that an award is achieved and then the department or institution sits back and congratulates themselves, as rightly they should. And then two years pass by and they realise that they’ve not looked at the Athena Swan application or action plan or not in any detail, not scrutinised it.”

“I think from a grassroots level, you know, we need to avoid the stage where we get to institutions saying, ‘Well, we have [managed] up to now, you don’t need to do anything.’”

Despite differences in context, participants consistently viewed external accountability through Athena Swan as essential for maintaining priority and momentum. Departmental interviews mirror these dynamics, describing reduced engagement after awards and the importance of formal structures and external accountability for maintaining progress:

“Once we got the Athena Swan mark, a lot of people dropped off the committee.”

The persistence of progress is closely tied to how well EDI practices are embedded institutionally and supported by leadership, rather than solely by Athena Swan participation. Where responsibility for EDI is distributed across teams and integrated into decision-making processes, progress is more likely to be sustained independently of the Charter. Strong, supportive leadership and proactive departmental cultures are critical for maintaining momentum; areas lacking these characteristics may regress if external support is removed.

Tangible versus intangible change

Interviewees across all award levels differentiated between tangible outcomes (eg wellbeing rooms, formal policies) and less visible cultural practices. Bronze institutions often focused on achieving initial tangible changes:

“We’ve reviewed policies such as flexible working, family-friendly policies because we’ve had feedback from staff. Again, Athena Swan has helped with that because we’ve done focus groups and surveys on staff to get their views, which has then driven us to relook at some of our policies such as flexible working.”

On the other hand, Silver and Gold institutions emphasised maintaining less visible practices over time:

“It’s some of those intangible benefits that I think are so, so powerful in terms of the networks that are created, the self-confidence and the creation of the spaces and – dare I use the phrase – safe spaces for women, you know, or men to speak up and say, ‘This isn’t right, this isn’t fair’.”

Departmental evidence reinforces this interpretation, highlighting tangible local benefits (eg leadership development opportunities, improved transparency) alongside significant opportunity costs, particularly for mid-career women:

“So that’s to progress women from the lower grades. So grade six, seven and eight through to nines and tens. And it’s a specific tailored programme for them. So it’s to help address that balance between having more female staff but more men in the higher positions.”

“So if it comes to me, I can be like, ‘This is what we need to do’, and then we can make a plan. And it’s also on me to implement that as well. So it takes away some of the admin load as well from the generally mid-career women who are doing this on top of everything else and also trying to get promoted and everything.”

Theme 5: return on investment and value for money

Differential costs and institutional capacity

Interviewees across all award levels described Athena Swan as a highly resource-intensive framework, though the nature and distribution of costs varied by institutional maturity and capacity. Bronze institutions most often characterised the process as demanding in terms of staff time and coordination, frequently relying on small numbers of committed individuals working beyond formal workload allocations:

“The biggest barrier truly is the time for people, especially with workload models. [...] Well, I can’t sit on the SAT because that’s not into my workload model or I only get allocated 20 hours. So therefore, you know, I can’t do X, Y or Z. I can only do X, Y and Z.”

Silver and Gold institutions reported similar considerations, but were more likely to describe partial mitigation through professional services support, dedicated coordination roles or more mature data systems:

“I think that it is sustained by a lot of hard work. Because you know we have our action plan, you know, to get Gold. It has to be quite ambitious and really you get Gold and you’re so exhausted and you’re like, ‘Oh this is incredible.’ And then there’s like a bit of a dip and then you think, ‘Oh, we have to start this again.’ You have to get back. And so I think sustaining that is through, really through your Swan Champions, your Swan action team within the school.”

Across all contexts, time rather than direct financial expenditure was identified as the primary cost:

“It really is a costly process because time is money.”

“I don’t think the membership fee is a killer as such. You know, we’ll grumble about it, but we wouldn’t stop doing it purely because [of] the cost. So that isn’t the bit. I think the issue going forward will be can we get our data better so we can produce it easy? Because last time we had to hire a temporary role to help us for 12 months and we couldn’t keep funding the role.”

However, participants also noted that the length of the application has been addressed by the Transformed Charter:

“But then I’ve had feedback that the Transformed Charter is so much better because obviously the submissions are a lot of work, take up a lot of time and resource, it is still a big task and it still requires an extensive action plan resources to then deliver that action plan. However, reducing the data that is needed for the submission and some of the kind of administrative aspects of the submission has really helped and because the most important part of a submission really is the action plan and what we’re going to do after it once we’ve got the work, the award, that’s when the work begins over the next five years.”

This perception was shared across award levels, suggesting that although intensity of effort is still a structural feature of the Charter, this has improved with the Transformed Charter.

Perceived benefits and opportunity costs

Participants identified a range of benefits that extended beyond award recognition, including strengthened governance, improved data literacy, increased visibility of inequality, and enhanced institutional credibility with funders and partners. Bronze institutions often emphasised early gains, such as improved awareness and policy coherence:

“[Senior leadership] also come to lots of events as well. Not just gender based, but race based and LGBT+ and so on. They’re a good presence in all of these things, which kind of shows me as an EDI practitioner and shows all of our staff and students how they are actually engaged and they do actually care about this. It’s not just a tick-box exercise.”

Silver and Gold institutions also highlighted longer-term benefits, including sustained cultural change and leverage in strategic decision-making:

“So the fact that we had to present permanent contracts versus fixed-term contracts really brought to light. There are these people who have no job security at all, possibly can’t get a mortgage, you know, lots of things which were sort of just accepted as life.”

“They then shared that anonymous shortlisting and now that’s something that happens as standard, across the university, unless there’s a very special reason why not. Which I think in a small number of research posts that might be the case. But for most roles it’s anonymous, at least until the face-to-face interviews, when you get an idea.”

Some interviewees across all award levels also acknowledged substantial opportunity costs, particularly where Athena Swan work was undertaken without formal recognition or workload allocation. Several participants expressed concern that this burden fell disproportionately on women and mid-career staff, potentially constraining research productivity and career progression:

“I mean the major part of our Athena Swan kind of things that people were raising were around workload and when I started the application I hardly got any workload to do the Athena Swan. But at that point I kind of thought well, you know, you get workload hours but we all know in academia that you just work until it’s done. I’m not saying that’s right.”

The analysis suggests that perceived value for money is closely linked to how well Athena Swan is embedded within institutional priorities and resourcing models, rather than to award level per se.

Attribution and assessment challenges

Many interviewees framed Athena Swan as a coordinating and accelerating mechanism - aligning disparate initiatives and providing structure and accountability - even as they acknowledged the difficulty of isolating Athena Swan-specific impacts from wider EDI activity, legislative requirements or sector-wide change.

“But I think the greater impact of Athena Swan actually is the requirement not only to be seen to review policy, but to actually review policy and to look at what that means on the ground. And I think actually that is the much more potent impact of Athena [Swan], that it has pushed higher education’s hand and made us examine ourselves and ask uncomfortable questions.”

The analysis indicates that traditional cost–benefit models may be poorly suited to capturing Athena Swan’s value, which is often realised cumulatively and indirectly over time.

Theme 6: activities that could be reduced or removed

Streamlining application processes and action planning

Interviewees across all award levels expressed strong support for reducing administrative burden, particularly in relation to extensive narrative writing; and large, unfocused action plans. Bronze institutions often described being somewhat daunted by the apparent scale of initial requirements:

“So I think previously we haven’t been able to go for Silver because [we] haven’t been ready, and we haven’t made that progress in terms of the data as well.”

Silver and Gold institutions emphasised diminishing returns from overly extensive documentation:

“So that’s not very helpful and everybody will complain about things being too long, but I do worry that it has become such a beast. The other side of that is then that when you do get the award and everybody’s very happy about it, but I think sometimes maybe that there’s not an understanding of the amount of work that goes into... [it].”

Participants across contexts advocated for smaller, prioritised action plans focused on high-impact interventions. Large action plans containing dozens of actions were widely perceived as difficult to manage and monitor effectively, regardless of award level.

Monitoring, reporting and apparent contradictions

Views diverged on monitoring requirements, with some interviewees arguing that there is too much monitoring, while others felt there is insufficient follow-through post-award. Rather than reflecting contradiction, the analysis suggests these views relate to differences in monitoring focus and effectiveness. Interviewees were generally critical of the value of repetitive reporting of static contextual data, but supportive of targeted monitoring linked to specific actions and outcomes:

“It’s almost like we go through this pain already for HESA for the Higher Education Stats Agency. You’re making us do it at a different time, in a different format. I mean that’s our problem as employers, but it’s a problem across the sector.”

Another interviewee explained the benefits of the data collection:

“Athena Swan made us collect lots of data [...] be quite analytical about actually where we were... That revealed things where there was a sort of maybe an unconscious bias that we weren’t aware of... it allowed us to say, “Oh actually this is wrong” and therefore gave us that power to say, ‘Well, we need to change this’.”

Bronze institutions were more likely to experience monitoring as burdensome, particularly where data systems were underdeveloped. Silver and Gold institutions more often highlighted gaps in post-award accountability rather than data collection itself. This points to a need for proportionate, stage-sensitive monitoring.

Duplication across EDI initiatives

Interviewees across award levels commented on duplication between Athena Swan and other EDI frameworks as a source of inefficiency. Views diverged on whether a single, unified EDI framework would be desirable. Some participants favoured integration to reduce duplication:

“If we’re talking about inclusivity, actually gender does not sit on its own, race on its own, disability does not sit on its own. So we need to look at people as people.”

Others cautioned that merging frameworks could dilute the specific focus on gender equality:

“How do we then make sure we’ve got the focus, proper focus on the different areas at the same time? I’m not sure.”

“You still need to have that focus... people could perceive it as being watered down if, if it’s just a bit of a catch-all.”

The analysis suggests that effective coordination, rather than structural merger, is the key determinant of efficiency.

4.3.2 Analytical limitations

This thematic analysis should be interpreted in light of several analytical limitations. First, we derived the findings from self-reported interview accounts from applicants and award-holding contexts; as such, they primarily capture perceptions of change, implementation experiences and sense-making, rather than providing independent verification of outcomes.

Second, while the analysis integrates institutional and departmental perspectives and distinguishes patterns across Bronze, Silver and Gold applicants, the sample is not intended to be statistically representative of the full Athena Swan membership base. This limits the extent to which prevalence or magnitude of impacts can be inferred, particularly for less common pathways (eg Gold progression) and for organisational contexts that are underrepresented in the interview sample.

Third, participants noted the difficulty of isolating Athena Swan-specific effects from wider EDI activity, legislative requirements, leadership changes and funder incentives; consequently, the themes should be understood as evidence of contribution and mechanism, rather than direct attribution.

Fourth, variation in data infrastructure and analytic capacity across contexts may have shaped both what participants were able to evidence and how they interpreted progress, particularly in relation to monitoring burdens and intersectional analysis.

Finally, the developmental framing of Bronze–Silver–Gold as a continuum is analytically useful for synthesis, but it may risk underplaying non-linear trajectories; local discontinuities; or instances where progress stalls or regresses due to resourcing, turnover or organisational change.

These considerations reinforce the importance of triangulating the interview findings with the application analysis and quantitative trends presented elsewhere in the report when drawing evaluative conclusions.

4.3.3 Final thoughts

In conclusion, the interview findings demonstrate that Athena Swan operates as a powerful structuring framework for advancing gender equality across both institutional and departmental contexts, with impacts best understood as cumulative and developmental rather than discrete or award specific.

Across Bronze, Silver and Gold applicants, Athena Swan has driven changes in policies, practices, governance and culture, while differences in emphasis reflect levels of maturity, resourcing and depth of embedding. Departmental interviews illustrate how institutional commitments are operationalised locally, often acting as testing grounds for innovation that later diffuses upward, while institutional structures provide legitimacy, coherence and sustainability for departmental action.

Although challenges remain – particularly in relation to workload, data capacity and sustaining momentum beyond award points – participants consistently viewed Athena Swan as a critical mechanism for legitimising equality work, embedding evidence-based decision-making and maintaining external accountability.

Overall, the analysis suggests that Athena Swan's value lies not in isolated interventions, but in its capacity to align local practice with institutional strategy, which enables progressive, sustained change over time.

Summary of key findings from interviews

- + **Athena Swan acts as a catalyst across levels**, prompting initial policy review in Bronze institutions and consolidation, monitoring and formalisation in Silver and Gold institutions.
- + **Departmental initiatives frequently precede institutional change**, with local pilots and action plans informing institution-wide policies and practices.
- + **Recruitment and promotion practices evolve with maturity**, shifting from procedural introductions in Bronze contexts to culturally embedded norms in Silver and Gold institutions.
- + **Data-driven decision-making is a core impact**, with Athena Swan legitimising systematic data collection and enabling visibility of previously hidden inequalities.
- + **Differences in perceptions of monitoring reflect capacity** with variation linked to data infrastructure and analytical maturity rather than resistance to evidence-based practice.
- + **Athena Swan legitimises cultural change**, opening space for dialogue in Bronze institutions and normalising equality considerations in Silver and Gold contexts.
- + **Institutional capacity development is cumulative**, developing through governance structures, networks and alignment with broader EDI strategies over time.
- + **Leadership engagement is critical at all levels**, with sustained senior support stabilising progress and a lack of engagement increasing reliance on individual goodwill.
- + **Resource considerations are structural rather than award-specific**, with time and workload identified as the primary costs across all contexts.
- + **Sustainability depends on embedding and accountability**, with Athena Swan's external scrutiny playing a key role in maintaining momentum beyond award milestones.

5 Integration of findings

This section synthesises evidence from across the evaluation to address the core evaluation questions. Consistent with the sequential explanatory mixed-methods design outlined in Section 1.2, we have drawn conclusions through explicit triangulation of quantitative award and HESA analyses, documentary evidence from institutional and departmental applications, and qualitative interview data. The discussion is framed by the Theory of Change and adopts a contribution-based interpretation, recognising the complexity of organisational change in HE and the limits of causal attribution.

5.1 To what extent has the Athena Swan Charter contributed to its intended outcomes?

Across all strands of evidence, Athena Swan emerges as a significant contributor to its intended intermediate outcomes, particularly those relating to the formalisation of equality work, development of institutional capacity, and legitimisation of gender equality within governance and decision-making.

From a quantitative perspective, award and membership data demonstrates sustained engagement with the Charter over time, with widespread uptake across the sector and patterned progression from Bronze to Silver and, more rarely, Gold. These trajectories align with the Theory of Change assumption that Athena Swan operates through long-term engagement rather than short-term intervention, and that higher-level outcomes are associated with cumulative participation rather than initial membership alone.

Application analysis provides documentary evidence that institutions and departments explicitly link Athena Swan participation to changes in policies, governance structures, monitoring practices and action planning. The increasing specificity, coherence and evidential sophistication observed in Silver and Gold submissions suggests that Athena Swan contributes to the maturation of institutional approaches to gender equality, rather than merely documenting pre-existing activity.

Interview evidence explains how these changes are enacted in practice. Participants consistently described Athena Swan as providing both an impetus and a framework for action: surfacing issues through data, creating internal accountability, and legitimising equality work that might otherwise be marginalised. Differences between Bronze and Silver or Gold institutions were not framed as differences in intent, but as differences in depth of embedding and institutional readiness.

Existing research consistently characterises Athena Swan as a process-oriented framework that supports institutional learning, reflexivity and accountability, rather than as a mechanism designed to deliver narrowly specified outcomes (Ovseiko et al, 2017). This interpretation is further supported by complexity-informed analyses which conceptualise Athena Swan as a contextually embedded system of action planning, where impact is understood in terms of contribution to change, improved conditions for change and increased probability that change can occur rather than linear causation (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al, 2020).

Previous Athena Swan evaluations (Graves, Rowell and Hunsicker, 2019; Munir et al, 2014) similarly conclude that Athena Swan's primary contribution lies in providing credibility, focus and impetus for gender equality work already underway, rather than generating discrete, attributable outcomes. The findings presented here align closely with previous evaluations, reinforcing the interpretation of Athena Swan as a structuring and enabling intervention whose primary contribution lies in shaping organisational conditions for change.

Overall, the triangulated evidence supports the conclusion that Athena Swan has contributed meaningfully to its intended outcomes by structuring, accelerating and sustaining institutional gender-equality activity, rather than by acting as a standalone driver of change.

5.2 To what extent has Athena Swan contributed to its intended long-term outcomes?

Evidence relating to long-term outcomes – such as sustained cultural change, embedded governance and improved senior-level representation – is necessarily indirect, but nonetheless robust when triangulated across methods.

Award progression data shows that progression beyond Bronze typically occurs only after extended periods of engagement, often spanning multiple award cycles. The rarity of Gold awards, and their concentration among long-standing participants, suggests that higher-level recognition reflects deep institutional change over time, consistent with the Theory of Change.

Application evidence from Silver and Gold institutions documents longitudinal monitoring, refinement of action plans, and integration of equality considerations into core institutional processes. These features indicate movement beyond compliance towards routinised practice, a key marker of long-term impact.

Interview data reinforces this interpretation, with participants in more mature institutions describing shifts in organisational norms, expectations and everyday decision-making. Participants described equality considerations as increasingly 'mainstreamed', embedded in routine processes rather than treated as exceptional or peripheral.

However, HESA gender pay gap analysis provides a more cautious counterpoint. While Athena Swan membership is associated with a statistically smaller gender representation gap at senior academic level, our analysis has not shown significant differences at professorial level. This finding suggests that while Athena Swan may contribute to improvements in progression pipelines, change at the most senior levels is slower and mediated by long-standing structural factors.

The cautious pattern observed in relation to long-term outcomes is consistent with existing longitudinal and sector-level research, which highlights the slow and uneven nature of change in senior academic representation.

Studies using HESA and institutional data have found limited short-term associations between Athena Swan participation and changes at professorial level once baseline

differences are taken into account (Armstrong and Sullivan, 2023; Gamage et al, 2020). Quantitative longitudinal studies similarly report that while Athena Swan participation is associated with improvements in gender diversity trajectories, particularly in managerial and non-professorial senior roles, statistically significant effects at professorial level remain limited over short- to medium-term periods (Xiao et al, 2020).

At the same time, qualitative and mixed-methods studies suggest that Athena Swan's influence on long-term outcomes is more plausibly realised through changes to promotion pipelines, organisational culture and governance norms, effects that may only become visible over extended timeframes (Ovseiko et al, 2020; Kalpazidou Schmidt et al, 2020). The present findings reinforce this interpretation, situating long-term impact within cumulative engagement and institutional maturity rather than immediate measurable shifts.

Overall, the evidence indicates that Athena Swan's contribution to long-term outcomes operates through sustained, systemic change: reshaping the structures and conditions that enable progress, rather than delivering rapid or uniform shifts in senior representation.

5.3 To what extent has Athena Swan contributed to changes in institutional and departmental policies and practices?

There is strong convergence across all data sources that Athena Swan has contributed to changes in policies and practices at both institutional and departmental levels.

Application analysis documents a wide range of changes, including recruitment and promotion procedures, flexible working arrangements, workload allocation models, parental leave policies and leadership development initiatives. Submissions data explicitly links these changes to Athena Swan action planning.

Interview evidence adds nuance, highlighting clear differences by award level. Bronze institutions and departments emphasised initial policy review and formalisation, often describing Athena Swan as prompting first-time scrutiny of existing practices. Silver and Gold institutions, by contrast, focused on consistency, formalisation and monitoring, which suggests a shift from policy creation to policy normalisation.

Departmental data, from both applications and interviews, illustrates how institutional policies are enacted locally and how departmental pilots can inform institution-wide change. This supports the Theory of Change assumption that departmental engagement is a critical mechanism for translating institutional intent into lived experience.

Changes to recruitment, promotion, flexible working and workload allocation policies are among the most frequently documented outcomes in prior Athena Swan evaluations (Graves, Rowell and Hunsicker, 2019; Ovseiko et al, 2017). Sector-wide evaluations and comparative analyses of certification schemes consistently identify policy formalisation, procedural transparency and monitoring as among the most reliable and observable impacts of Athena Swan, particularly at early and intermediate stages of engagement (Munir et al, 2014; Tzanakou, Clayton-Hathway and Humbert, 2021). The findings here extend this

literature by explicitly demonstrating how such policy changes are operationalised at departmental level and, in some cases, diffuse upwards to institutional practice, providing empirical support for claims that Athena Swan functions across multiple organisational layers.

The triangulated evidence suggests that Athena Swan's distinctive contribution lies not in introducing novel policy domains, but in linking policy change to evidence, accountability and sustained review.

5.4 To what extent has Athena Swan contributed to developing institutional capacity to advance gender equality?

Capacity development emerges as one of the most consistently evidenced areas of impact. Quantitative analyses indicate that institutions with extensive departmental portfolios and longer engagement are more likely to progress to higher award levels, suggesting accumulation of organisational capability over time. Application evidence shows increasing sophistication in data use, governance structures and evaluation practices as institutions progress through award levels.

Interview data explains how this capacity is built in practice, through the establishment of EDI roles, governance committees, communities of practice and professional support structures. Participants consistently described Athena Swan as providing the structure and legitimacy required to invest in such capacity.

Previous research identifies capacity building – particularly in relation to data collection, governance structures and institutional coordination – as a central outcome of Athena Swan engagement (Ovseiko et al, 2020). In particular, analyses of Athena Swan Silver action plans demonstrate how the Charter builds capacity through institutions' iterative data use, governance alignment and locally adaptive action planning, reinforcing the framing of Athena Swan as a complex social intervention rather than a compliance mechanism (Kalpazidou Schmidt et al, 2020). The present findings align with this evidence, and reinforce the view that Athena Swan contributes to capacity development incrementally and unevenly, shaped by institutional resources, data infrastructure and leadership commitment rather than award status alone.

At the same time, evidence from all strands highlights uneven capacity, particularly in relation to data infrastructure and intersectional analysis. These limitations suggest that while Athena Swan contributes to capacity building, it does not eliminate underlying structural constraints.

5.5 How do contextual factors influence the effectiveness of the Charter?

Contextual variation is evident across all phases of the evaluation. Award and progression data shows systematic differences by institution type, size and disciplinary profile, with

research-intensive universities more likely to hold extensive departmental portfolios and higher-level awards.

HESA analysis indicates that non-member institutions differ structurally from members; this limits direct comparison and reinforces the importance of institutional context in interpreting outcomes.

Interview evidence illustrates how leadership stability, resourcing, workforce composition and disciplinary culture shape implementation. These findings support a contextualised interpretation of impact, consistent with the Theory of Change.

The influence of institutional context on Athena Swan outcomes is well established in the literature. Previous studies have demonstrated that institutional size, disciplinary profile, research intensity and resourcing shape both engagement with the Charter and the nature of reported impacts (Graves, Rowell and Hunsicker, 2019; Ovseiko et al, 2017). Comparative research on certification and award schemes across Europe further highlights that organisational and contextual variables fundamentally impact implementation and reported impact, reinforcing the need for contextualised evaluation approaches (Tzanakou, Clayton-Hathway and Humbert, 2021).

By integrating cluster-based quantitative analysis with qualitative evidence, the present evaluation strengthens this body of work, and confirms that observed variation reflects structural and contextual conditions rather than differences in institutional commitment or intent. This reinforces the appropriateness of contribution-based evaluation approaches in complex organisational settings.

5.6 Sustainability: to what extent are outcomes likely to persist?

Evidence on sustainability points to both progress and vulnerability. Interview and application data indicates that sustainability is strongest where equality work is embedded within governance structures, workload models and routine decision-making. Many participants viewed external accountability through Athena Swan as essential for maintaining momentum, particularly in preventing post-award decline.

Participants across contexts differentiated between tangible outcomes (eg formal policies) and less visible cultural practices, and noted that the latter require ongoing reinforcement. Departmental evidence highlights the risk of reliance on individual champions, particularly in resource-constrained contexts.

Existing Athena Swan research consistently highlights sustainability as a key challenge, particularly in relation to maintaining momentum beyond award points (Graves, Rowell and Hunsicker, 2019). Early and subsequent evaluations consistently report that sustainability is strongest where Athena Swan processes are embedded within governance structures and supported by dedicated resources, and weakest where responsibility rests with individual champions or short-term project arrangements (Munir et al, 2014; Kalpazidou Schmidt et al,

2020). The distinction we observe here between tangible policy changes and less visible cultural practices echoes earlier findings that cultural change is both harder to sustain and harder to evidence (Ovseiko et al, 2020). The present analysis extends this literature by demonstrating how sustainability risks manifest differently across institutional maturity levels and departmental contexts.

Overall, the evidence suggests that Athena Swan supports sustainability, but that persistence of outcomes depends on depth of embedding rather than award status alone.

5.7 Value for money and efficiency

Across all strands of evidence, Athena Swan is understood to represent a significant time investment rather than a direct financial one. Interview data points to opportunity costs, particularly for mid-career women, while application evidence shows that institutions making sustained investment tend to report deeper and more durable impacts

Perceptions of the Transformed Charter suggest reduced administrative burden without undermining core objectives, though the intensity of implementation remains a structural feature of the framework.

Previous evaluations of Athena Swan have consistently identified time and workload as the principal costs of participation, with opportunity costs disproportionately affecting women and mid-career staff (Graves, Rowell and Hunsicker, 2019; Ovseiko et al, 2017).

Additionally, comparative analyses of certification schemes caution that administrative intensity is an inherent feature of process-based equality frameworks and that perceived inefficiency often reflects under-resourcing rather than design failure (Tzanakou, Clayton-Hathway and Humbert, 2021). The findings here align with this perspective, reinforcing the interpretation of Athena Swan as a coordinating and capacity-building framework whose efficiency depends on proportionality, institutional embedding and support structures rather than award outcomes alone.

The triangulated evidence indicates that Athena Swan delivers value primarily as a coordinating and capacity-building framework, rather than through narrow cost–benefit mechanisms.

5.8 Implications for Advance HE and the Athena Swan Charter

The findings suggest several implications for the Athena Swan Charter:

- + Continued emphasis on **implementation and action planning**, rather than application volume, aligns with how impact is realised.
- + Targeted support for **data capability and intersectional analysis** would address persistent sector-wide constraints.
- + Greater attention to **workload recognition and resourcing** is critical to avoid reproducing inequalities through equality work itself.

- + **Ongoing monitoring of the Transformed Charter** is needed to ensure that reduced burden does not weaken accountability.

Recommendations emerging from this evaluation are consistent with prior literature calling for greater emphasis on implementation quality, proportionality and data capability, rather than application volume or compliance (Graves, Rowell and Hunsicker, 2019). These implications are closely aligned with recommendations from previous evaluations and comparative research, which emphasise proportionality, implementation quality, data capability and workload recognition as critical to sustaining engagement and avoiding unintended inequalities (Tzanakou, Clayton-Hathway and Humbert, 2021; Kalpazidou Schmidt et al, 2020; Munir et al, 2014).

By grounding these implications in triangulated evidence, the present evaluation contributes to the evolving evidence base informing the ongoing development of the Athena Swan Charter.

5.9 Analytical limitations

This evaluation does not seek to establish causal attribution between Athena Swan participation and observed outcomes. Instead, through triangulation across quantitative trends, documentary evidence and lived experience, it assesses Athena Swan's contribution within a complex policy environment. The convergence of evidence across methods strengthens confidence that Athena Swan has played a meaningful role in shaping institutional conditions for gender equality, while highlighting the limits of what any single framework can achieve in isolation.

5.10 Final thoughts

In conclusion, the triangulated evidence indicates that Athena Swan has made a substantive contribution to advancing gender equality within UK HE, primarily by shaping the institutional conditions under which change can occur. Across quantitative award trajectories, HESA analysis, application evidence and interview accounts, Athena Swan emerges not as a discrete causal intervention but as a structuring, legitimising and accountability framework that supports cumulative organisational change over time.

Its strongest impacts are evident in the formalisation and embedding of policies, the development of institutional capacity, and the normalisation of evidence-informed decision-making. While progress towards long-term outcomes – particularly at the most senior academic levels – remains uneven and slow, the evidence suggests that this reflects structural and temporal constraints rather than lack of contribution. Sustainability is most evident where Athena Swan principles are embedded within governance, resourcing and everyday practice, and weakest where activity remains dependent on individual goodwill.

Overall, the findings support a contribution-based interpretation of impact: Athena Swan has played a meaningful role in aligning local practice with institutional strategy, enabling sustained attention to gender equality within a complex and evolving policy environment.

Key takeaways

- + Athena Swan contributes primarily by **structuring and legitimising institutional gender-equality work**, rather than by producing isolated or short-term outcomes.
- + Triangulated evidence from award data, HESA analysis, applications and interviews shows **consistent contribution to policy change, capacity building and cultural normalisation**.
- + Progression patterns indicate that **meaningful outcomes are cumulative**, with Silver and Gold awards reflecting long-term engagement rather than rapid advancement.
- + Changes in policies and practices are evident across institutions and departments, with differences by award level reflecting depth of embedding rather than intent.
- + Athena Swan has **strengthened data-driven decision-making**, though capacity for intersectional analysis remains uneven across the sector.
- + Evidence of contribution to **long-term outcomes** is strongest in governance, culture and progression pipelines, and more limited at professorial level.
- + **Departmental engagement** plays a critical role in operationalising institutional commitments and translating policy into lived experience.
- + Sustainability is highest where equality work is **embedded in governance, workload models and routine decision-making**, and lowest where reliant on individual champions.
- + Athena Swan is widely perceived as resource-intensive, and participants identify time and workload as the primary costs rather than direct financial expenditure.
- + Overall, Athena Swan delivers value as a **coordinating and capacity-building framework**, supporting sustained organisational change within a complex policy context.

6 Conclusion and recommendations

This comprehensive evaluation reveals that the Athena Swan Charter has served as a significant catalyst for gender-equality progress across UK HE, driving widespread policy change, changes in processes and practices leading to cultural transformation, measurable improvements in representation, and career progression for women (particularly those in academic roles).

The widespread adoption of membership reflects the successful positioning of gender equality as a sector-wide expectation, while the depth of change achieved by leading institutions demonstrates that sustained, appropriately resourced commitment can deliver transformational outcomes across multiple dimensions simultaneously.

The evaluation also reveals substantial variation in the depth of engagement between members, challenges around resources and sustainability, and ongoing gaps in addressing intersectionality and the experiences of diverse staff populations.

Bronze awards continue to dominate with a growing share of award holders progressing to more advanced forms of recognition. Progression pathways vary but progression to Silver typically occurs after several years' sustained engagement, supported by leadership commitment and data capability. Gold awards are concentrated among a small number of long-standing members, highlighting that advanced recognition reflects deep institutional change rather than routine progression.

In a context of significant resource constraints, there are tensions regarding the appropriate balance between accountability and administrative burden. Sustainability depends heavily on external accountability mechanisms that many institutions cannot yet internalise.

The Charter has evolved from a small initiative targeting a limited group of early adopters to a framework with sector-wide recognition and substantial infrastructure. Its continued effectiveness will depend on adaptive implementation that responds to changing sector and institutional contexts, emerging equality challenges and lessons from two decades of Charter experience.

Looking to the future, critical considerations include supporting institutions with differential capacity, maintaining accountability while further reducing administrative burden, addressing intersectionality without diluting focus on persistent gender inequalities, sustaining departmental engagement alongside institution-wide approaches, and ensuring that the Charter continues to drive genuine cultural transformation rather than performative compliance.

Ultimately, this evaluation suggests that Athena Swan's greatest impact lies in its role as a framework and process for continuous institutional self-examination, evidence-based action and sustained commitment to creating more equitable academic environments — rather than as an endpoint or award to achieve. Institutions that embrace this understanding achieve the deepest and most sustainable progress, embedding equality as a core

institutional value that shapes decision-making, culture and practice across all areas of their work.

6.1 Recommendations

Building on the evaluation findings, and stakeholder feedback, several recommendations emerge for both Charter members and Advance HE.

6.1.1 For Charter members

1 Embed Athena Swan principles into core governance and strategy

Sustained impact is achieved by integrating equality considerations into routine decision-making. Institutions should mainstream equality considerations into routine governance, committee business, workforce planning and strategic decision-making, rather than these being treated as a periodic or parallel exercise linked only to award cycles.

2 Strengthen workload recognition and resourcing for equality work

Institutions should strengthen efforts to formally recognise equality work within workload models, promotion criteria and professional roles. Reliance on unpaid goodwill – particularly from mid-career women – undermines sustainability and risks reproducing inequalities.

3 Prioritise focused, strategic and flexible action plans

Large action plans containing dozens of actions were widely perceived as difficult to manage and monitor effectively, regardless of award level. Participants across contexts advocated for shorter, strategically prioritised action plans focused on high-impact interventions with clear ownership, appropriate resourcing and monitoring, to drive sustained change. Monitoring of action plans needs to be embedded in governance structures while remaining flexible and adaptable to changes in context and emerging opportunities.

4 Strengthen data capability, especially intersectional analysis

Without improved data capability, institutions struggle with proportional monitoring of evidence-based intervention. At Bronze level particularly, early investment in data systems is important to establishing clear baselines and success measures. Drawing on good practice emerging in the sector and beyond – for example, the development of interactive EDI data dashboards – members should strengthen their data infrastructure and analytical capability, with a specific focus on understanding intersectional inequalities (eg looking at intersections of gender and ethnicity, disability, or contract type) as well as gender outcomes.

5 Use departmental engagement strategically as a driver of change

Where institutional size and resources permit, institutions should maintain or consider strategic engagement in departmental Athena Swan activity, recognising departments as sites of rapid innovation that translate institutional policy into improved lived experience. The benefits of departmental engagement are likely to be greater where there are clear

coordination and communication or practice-sharing mechanisms in place; this will enable members to scale and normalise successful local initiatives institution wide.

6 Foster and engage networks and communities of practice

Institutions should continue to foster and strategically engage staff networks and communities of practice of Athena Swan and EDI practitioners, to ensure grassroots engagement in policy processes, drive forward inclusive culture and practice change and enhance belonging.

6.1.2 For Advance HE

1 Maintain focus on action and implementation in the Transformed Charter

Advance HE should continue shifting the emphasis of the Charter away from application compliance towards support for effective implementation, delivery, monitoring and evaluation, while ensuring that this does not weaken accountability or momentum.

2 Provide targeted support for data capability and proportional monitoring

Advance HE should expand guidance, tools and peer learning for members, focused on data systems, dashboards and intersectional analysis. This will enable efficiencies in data gathering and proportionate monitoring that matches institutional maturity and capacity.

3 Strengthen the evidence base on effective interventions

Advance HE should gather and make accessible further evidence-based case studies drawn from good practice identified among Charter members and enable sharing of learning across institutions to help accelerate change.

4 Support sustainable resourcing models for equality work

Advance HE should identify and continue to promote good practice in workload allocation for Athena Swan and related EDI work, in the professionalisation of EDI roles, and in resourcing models for EDI across the sector.

5 Strengthen coherence across equality frameworks without diluting focus

Advance HE should continue enhancing alignment and synergies between Athena Swan and other equality frameworks (eg Race Equality Charter, Inclusive Institutions Framework), enabling members to develop suitable approaches to EDI within their context while maintaining focus on gender equality.

6.2 Further research

Future research could build on the present analysis by addressing areas where data limitations restrict more detailed insight. In particular, the impact of Athena Swan activity on PTO staff remains underexplored, as the current dataset does not differentiate outcomes for this group, and available HESA data does not distinguish between full-time and part-time roles.

Further work could also examine whether institutions with medical schools exhibit distinct patterns of gender representation or award progression, given their unique workforce structures, contractual arrangements and disciplinary profiles.

Other areas of suggested future research are to explore further Athena Swan's long-term influence on representation and pay at professorial level, the mechanisms whereby departmental innovations scale up, whether the major revisions to the Charter in 2021 have led to changes in the progression pathways, and the extent to which outcomes persist among inactive or former members and which types of changes are more resilient over time.

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Annex 1: detailed methodology

Quantitative data collection and analysis

Descriptive analysis

Membership growth over time

We examined membership growth over time using Advance HE membership records to analyse patterns of institutional engagement with the Athena Swan Charter between 2005 and 2025. The dataset was prepared to support year-by-year comparison, which enabled identification of when institutions joined the Charter, whether membership was sustained and how participation expanded across the sector over time. This descriptive analysis addresses evaluation questions relating to the scale and reach of the Charter and provides essential context for interpreting subsequent analyses of award activity and progression. As with any administrative dataset, findings reflected recorded membership status rather than the depth or quality of institutional engagement, and results may be affected by missing or inconsistent historical records.

Award holder trends over time

We examined trends in award holding over time using the full historical record of Athena Swan institutional and departmental awards, including both active and inactive certifications. Descriptive statistics were used to generate annual counts of award holders by award level (Bronze, Silver and Gold) and by award scope (institutional, departmental and RI, where applicable). This enabled the identification of key growth phases, changes in the distribution of award levels over time and differences between organisational types. The analysis supports the evaluation questions concerning the spread and maturity of the Charter. A key limitation is that award counts capture formal recognition rather than the processes through which change occurs, and some uncertainty remains where awards were renewed early or administrative records changed across cycles.

Progression through awards

We analysed progression through award levels using institutional membership and award timelines to estimate typical pathways from membership to first award, and from Bronze to Silver and Silver to Gold. The purpose of this analysis was to understand variation in the pace and extent of progression across institutions and to provide an empirical basis for interpreting differences in institutional maturity. Progression indicators were calculated only where institutions had achieved the relevant award levels, ensuring that averages did not treat non-achievement as delayed progression. This analysis informs evaluation questions relating to institutional capacity development and longer-term outcomes. Interpretation is subject to limitations common to progression analyses: timelines reflect recorded award dates rather than informal preparatory activity, and the analysis does not establish causal relationships between Charter participation and observed outcomes.

Gender pay gap

The gender pay gap analysis used publicly available HESA staff salary data (Table 17) to examine whether Athena Swan membership is associated with different patterns of representation of men and women in the highest academic salary band (£68,857+). This approach is consistent with existing HE research, which has shown that gender pay gaps in academia are driven primarily by differences in representation at senior grades rather than by unequal pay for equal work (eg UCEA, 2024; Ovseiko et al, 2020). Given the constraints of HESA's published data, the analysis focused on representation gaps, defined as the percentage-point difference between the proportion of men and women in the top salary band within each institution.

Institutions were classified as Athena Swan members or non-members, and comparisons were conducted across three HESA contract levels: other academic, senior academic and professor, reflecting established distinctions in the literature between academic career stages. Because the analytical objective was to assess whether Athena Swan membership is associated with smaller gender representation gaps at the top of the salary distribution, we applied independent-samples t-tests (with Welch's correction for unequal variances) for each contract level, using the representation gap as the outcome variable and membership status as the grouping variable. This cross-sectional approach aligns with prior sector analyses that use institutional-level administrative data to compare structural outcomes across groups of institutions (eg Stephenson, 2024; UCEA, 2019).

As with previous research in this area, the analysis is subject to important limitations. HESA salary data is banded rather than individual-level, and the highest salary band is open-ended, meaning that the analysis captures relative representation at senior levels rather than actual pay differentials. Moreover, Athena Swan does not mandate reporting on pay gaps, and the analysis does not imply causation between Charter participation and observed differences. Findings should therefore be interpreted as indicative of associations within a wider body of research on gender inequality in academic career progression, rather than as direct evidence of impact.

Qualitative data collection and analysis

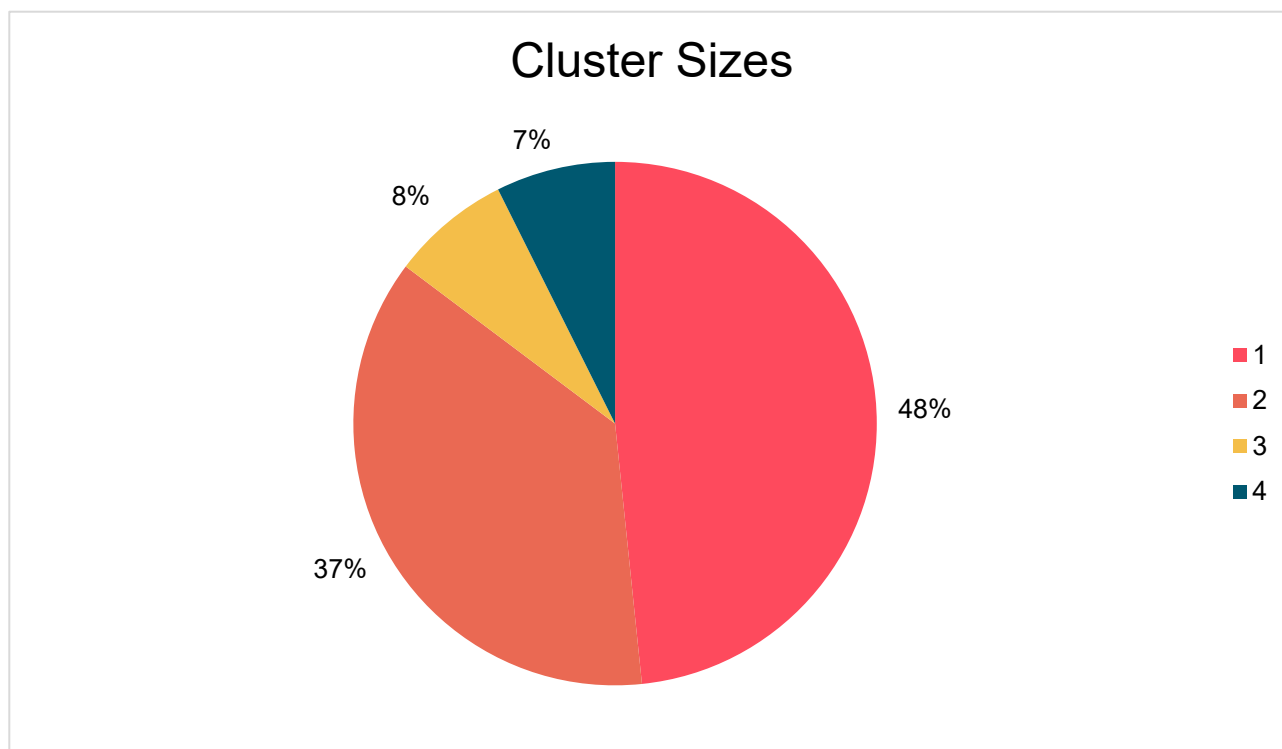
The qualitative evaluation employed a qualitative, multi-site design structured around the key domains of impact, sustainability and value for money, directly guided by the evaluation questions.

Cluster analysis

We used the cluster analysis primarily as a sampling strategy to support the qualitative phase of the evaluation. Its purpose was to identify groups of universities and RIs at different stages of engagement and progression within the Athena Swan Charter, ensuring that qualitative analysis was informed by systematic variation in institutional maturity, activity and context. This approach enabled purposive selection of cases that reflected the diversity of institutional journeys across the sector, rather than relying on self-selection or convenience sampling.

Institutions were first differentiated according to Athena Swan membership status, distinguishing between those with active participation and those that no longer held membership. Inactive members are defined here as institutions that previously engaged with Athena Swan but did not hold an active membership during the reference period. Among active members, institutions were grouped using quantitative indicators reflecting progression and activity, including institutional award level, the volume and distribution of departmental awards, and indicative measures of time between award stages. For RIs, clustering focused on institutional awards only, reflecting the absence of departmental submissions. The resulting clusters represent empirically derived profiles of Athena Swan engagement and maturity, aligned with the evaluation's Theory of Change, which highlights that outcomes vary according to the depth and duration of engagement.

Among universities, we identified four clusters. Cluster 1 (n = 58) comprises active members with initial departmental activity, characterised by relatively small numbers of departmental awards, often concentrated at Bronze level, and indicative of early or contained departmental engagement. Cluster 2 (n = 45) includes active members with emerging departmental activity, defined by a broader and growing portfolio of departmental submissions, typically including a mix of Bronze and Silver awards and signalling increasing institutional capacity to support departmental engagement. Cluster 3 (n = 9) consists of inactive members, with no current Athena Swan participation or award activity. Cluster 4 (n = 9) comprises institutions holding advanced institutional awards (Silver and/or Gold) alongside extensive departmental portfolios, frequently spanning multiple disciplines. This cluster is weighted towards large, research-intensive universities with substantial STEMM provision, reflecting differences in organisational scale and capacity rather than a normative judgement of performance (Figure 1).



Cluster summary	Count / Ratio	Percentage
Total cases	122	100.0%
Size of smallest cluster	9	7.4%
Size of largest cluster	59	48.4%
Largest-to-smallest ratio	6.56	

Silhouette measure 0.60

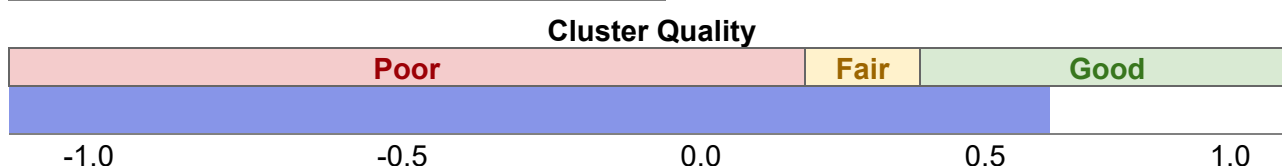
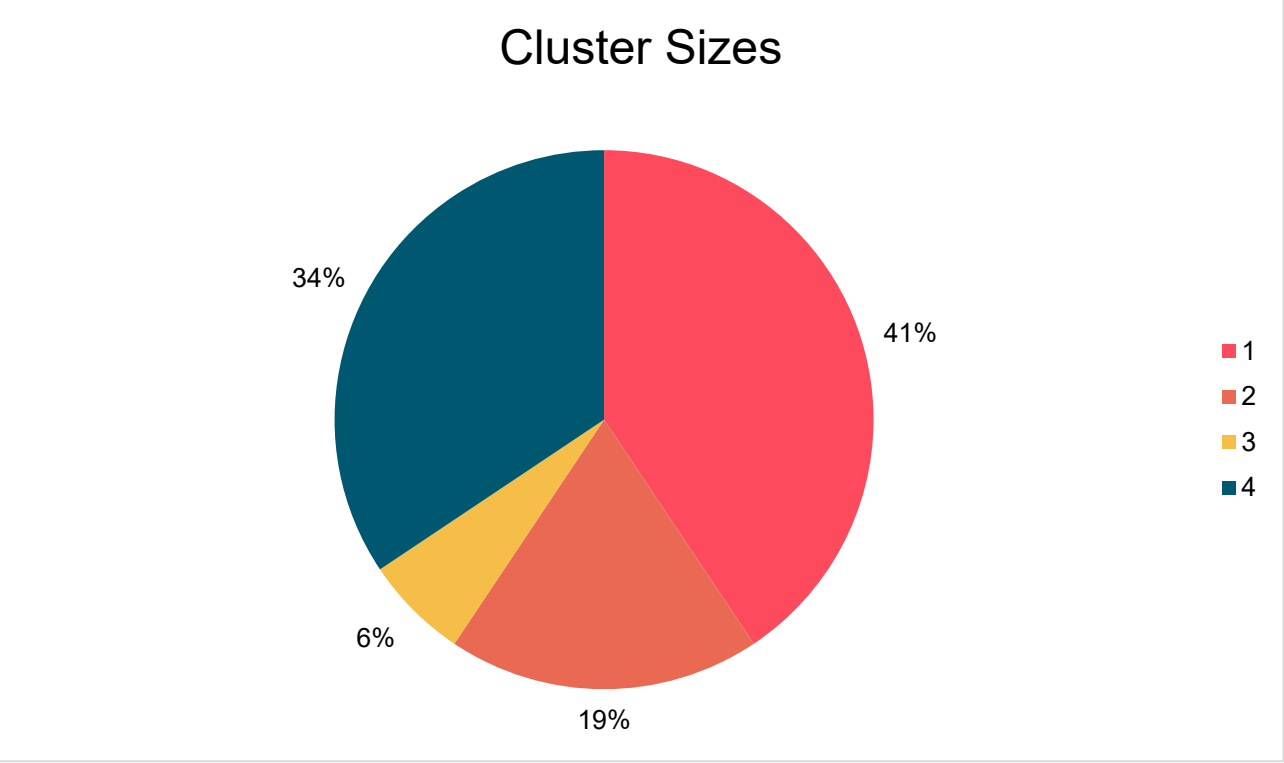


Figure 1. Athena Swan university clusters

For RIs, the clustering similarly distinguishes between inactive institutions, early-stage participants and more advanced award holders, and reveals a narrower range of progression pathways than those observed among universities.

Cluster 1 (n = 13) comprises inactive RIs with no current institutional award. Cluster 2 (n = 6) includes active Silver-level members that have progressed from Bronze to Silver over an extended period, with an average progression time of approximately 6.1 years (median ≈ 6.0 years). Cluster 3 (n = 2) represents a small group of top-tier RIs whose first or early award

was at Silver or Gold level, indicating rapid progression relative to the wider RI population. Cluster 4 (n = 11) comprises active members that are predominantly at Bronze level, with some holding no award. Overall, this pattern highlights that RIs tend to follow slower and less varied progression pathways than universities, with far fewer achieving higher-level awards (Figure 2).



Cluster summary	Count / Ratio	Percentage
Total cases	32	100.0%
Size of smallest cluster	2	6.3%
Size of largest cluster	13	40.6%
Largest-to-smallest ratio	6.50	

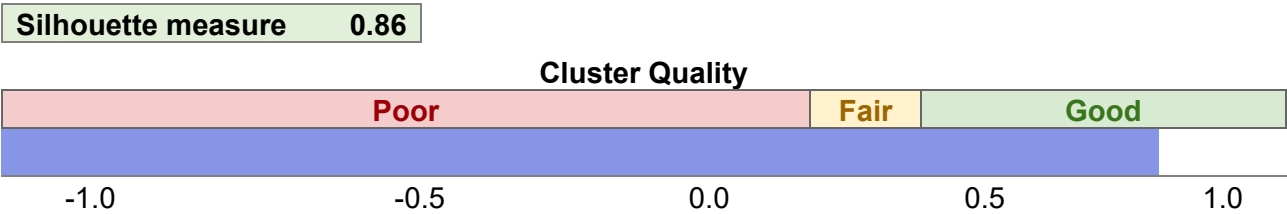


Figure 2. Athena Swan research institute clusters.

These clusters were used to guide the selection of institutional and departmental applications for qualitative analysis, ensuring representation across different stages of engagement while excluding institutions whose submissions did not contain sufficient evidence of implementation or impact (eg inactive members). This integration of cluster analysis into the sampling strategy strengthened the coherence between the quantitative and qualitative phases, supported systematic cross-case comparison, and enhanced the credibility of findings on impact, sustainability and value for money.

7.1.1 Application analysis

We undertook an analysis of institutional and departmental Athena Swan applications and associated action plans to examine how reported outcomes were articulated, evidenced and linked to specific actions, and to explore the mechanisms through which change was expected to occur.

This approach directly addresses evaluation questions relating to impact, sustainability and value for money by enabling assessment of documented changes in policies, practices and organisational culture, as well as the extent to which these changes align with the Theory of Change. We purposively sampled applications using findings from the quantitative phase, including the cluster analysis, to ensure representation across different stages of engagement and progression, organisational types and levels of maturity. This ensured that the qualitative analysis captured meaningful variation in practice while avoiding over-representation of any single institutional profile. Data were extracted systematically from applications and action plans using a structured analytical framework aligned to the evaluation questions, focusing on reported changes, enabling and constraining factors, evidence of implementation, and claims of impact. Tables 1 and 2 list the number of institutions and RIs selected from each cluster.

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 4
Number of universities	1	8	5
Number of departments	1	8	5

Table 1. Number of universities and departments selected in each cluster.

	Cluster 2	Cluster 3
Number of RIs	3	1

Table 2. Number of RI applications selected per cluster

In addition to the analysis of Silver and Gold applications, we included a targeted sample of Bronze-level applications to explore short-term impacts and potential barriers to progression at earlier stages of engagement with the Charter (seven University, seven departmental and three RI applications).

Including Bronze applications enabled examination of early changes in practice, capacity building, and implementation challenges that may not yet translate into higher-level outcomes but are nonetheless critical to understanding progression pathways within the Athena Swan framework. This approach supports evaluation questions concerning the development of institutional capacity, the barriers and enablers of change, and the conditions required for sustained impact over time. We analysed the extracted data thematically to identify common patterns, differences across contexts, and areas of convergence and divergence with the quantitative findings, thereby supporting triangulation within the mixed-methods design. We conducted an analysis of institutional and departmental Athena Swan applications and action plans to identify documented changes, assess alignment with reported outcomes and support triangulation of findings.

Participant interviews

Selected from the cluster analysis, we conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with institutional leaders; Athena Swan SAT members; EDI practitioners; and departmental representatives from Bronze, Silver and Gold award holders. These interviews explored the extent to which the Charter has contributed to intended outcomes, long-term impacts, policy and practice change, capacity development, departmental outcomes, contextual influences, and barriers and enablers to effective implementation. Table 3 illustrates the selection of participants across different award categories and types of institutions.

	Bronze	Silver	Gold
Universities	6	4	3
Departments	7	5	3
Research institutes	1	1	—

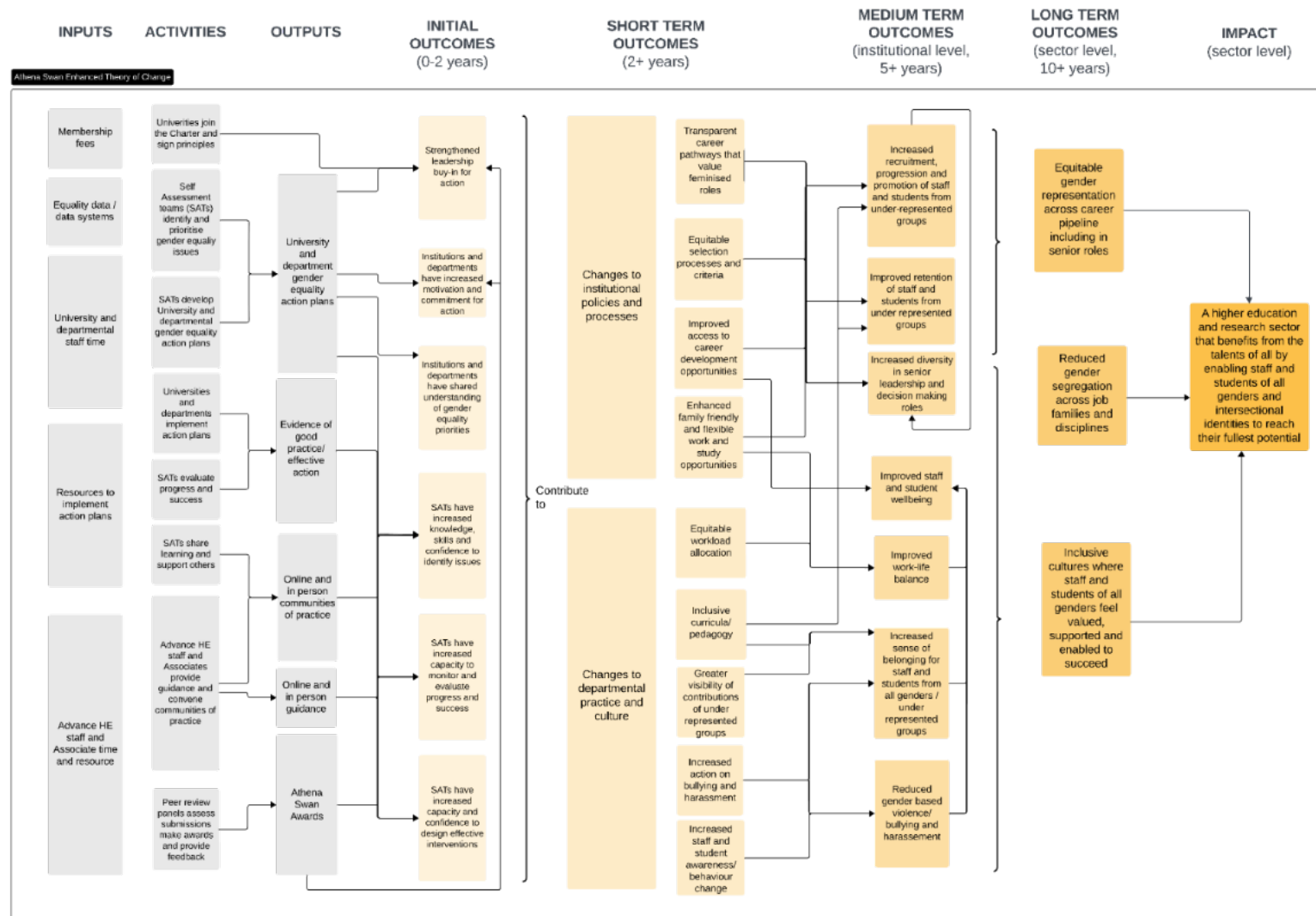
Table 3. Participants selected across award categories and institution types

For the interviews with University representatives, four were selected from cluster 1, three from cluster 2 and three from cluster 4. For the RI interviews, one each were drawn from clusters 1 and 4.

Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes, were conducted in person or online, and were recorded with consent. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase thematic analysis, incorporating both deductive coding aligned with the evaluation questions and inductive coding to capture emergent themes, with cross-institutional comparison across award levels. Ethical procedures included voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymisation and secure data management. Limitations include reliance on self-reported data, qualitative scope, and variations in institutional context that may affect comparability.

We present the key findings under the thematic areas reflected in the evaluation questions – namely impact, sustainability, and value for money and efficiency – and further structure the findings around the sub-questions within each theme.

Annex 2: Draft Theory of Change for Athena Swan Charter



Contact us

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