

## **Athena SWAN Gender Equality Plans and the Gendered Impact of COVID-19**

**Thereza Raquel Sales de Aguiar**

**Phone:** + 44 (0) 1224 274357

**e-mail:** [thereza.deaguiar@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:thereza.deaguiar@abdn.ac.uk)

**Business School**

University of Aberdeen

MacRobert Building

Aberdeen, AB24 5UA

Scotland UK

**Shamima Haque**

**Phone:** + 44 (0) 1224 272716

**e-mail:** [shamima.haque@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:shamima.haque@abdn.ac.uk)

**Business School**

University of Aberdeen

MacRobert Building

Aberdeen, AB24 5UA

Scotland UK

**Keith A. Bender**

**Phone:** + 44 (0) 1224 273411

**e-mail:** [kabender@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:kabender@abdn.ac.uk)

**Business School**

University of Aberdeen

Edward Wright Building

Aberdeen, AB24 3QY

Scotland UK

## **Athena SWAN Gender Equality Plans and the Gendered Impact of COVID-19**

### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores Athena SWAN as a mechanism to govern gender equality and diversity in the context of the UK Business and Management Schools during COVID-19. More specifically, this paper reports on the struggles that UK Business Schools are now facing in projecting themselves as equal and diverse as well as efficient and viable. Using governmentality theory, a thematic analysis is applied to Athena SWAN applications and face-to-face interviews conducted with a number of leaders of Athena SWAN-awarded UK Business Schools. The results suggest that Athena SWAN opens a space for self-governing gender equality and diversity with some progress on this agenda. However, the Athena SWAN framework calls our attention to invisibilities of inequalities in times of crisis such as COVID-19, when governmentality of gender issues can become limited when targets on efficiency are set as a priority.

**Key words:** COVID-19, Gender, Athena SWAN, Governmentality.

**Running title:** Athena SWAN, Gender and COVID-19

## **Athena SWAN Gender Equality Plans and Gendered Impact of COVID-19**

### **1. Introduction:**

The long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is being felt by Higher Education (HE) around the world both in student enrolment and in teaching and learning (Deloitte, 2020). Emerging research shows that the negative impact of COVID-19 in HE has not played out equitably disproportionately affecting females compared to their male counterparts (Parlak et al. 2021; Pereira, 2021; Pinho-Gomes et al., 2020; Utoft, 2020; Viglione, 2020), leading to significant additional challenges for women in academia (Guy & Arthur, 2020; Plotnikof et al., 2020).

This is not surprising given that previous research already finds significant gender inequality in HE (David, 2015; ECU, 2018; Galizzi & Siboni, 2016; Haynes & Fearfull, 2008; Rosser et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2012). Currently, regulators and governments are paying closer attention to these gender disparities. As Baltaru (2020) suggests, initiatives such as Athena SWAN raise awareness of gendered differences in HE, though it can also simply be a signal of the desire for inclusivity (particularly among elite universities) rather than affecting change. Despite such initiatives, gender inequality in HE is an ongoing issue, and COVID-19 has seemingly made things worse along a number of dimensions (Averett, 2020; Wright et al., 2021). Therefore, understanding the potential gendered impact of COVID-19 in HE is critical to address where these inequalities exist.

There is growing attention from the media and professional organisations documenting the gendered impact of COVID-19 on women in general (Clavijo, 2020; Gao & Sai, 2020; Hennekam & Shymko, 2020) and within HE (Abdellatif & Gatto, 2020; Amano-Patiño et al.,

2020; McKinsey & Company, 2020; Pinho-Gomes et al., 2020; Times Higher Education, 2020a, 2020b; Viglione, 2020). However, there is no academic research to date which investigates HE's accountability practices in addressing gender equality during a particular crisis such as the pandemic.

Therefore, through the lenses of 'governmentality' (Foucault, 2007), we explore how Athena SWAN governs gender equality in the context of UK Business and Management Schools (hereafter UK Business Schools) during COVID-19. We organise our discussion as follows. Section 2 explains the Athena SWAN initiative and provides a brief literature review on the gendered impact of COVID-19 in HE. Section 3 presents governmentality as the theoretical framework through which we examine Athena SWAN. Section 4 describes the research methodology. Section 5 discusses the results from the data analysis. Conclusions are presented in Section 6.

## **2. The Athena SWAN charter and the gendered impact of COVID-19 in HE**

Athena SWAN is a charter commissioned, owned and managed by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) which is now part of Advance Higher Education (Advance HE). Advance HE was formed in March 2018 by the merger of the ECU, the Higher Education Academy and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, following the recommendation of the Bell Review to create a single sector agency for equality and diversity, learning and teaching, and leadership and governance in HE<sup>1</sup>. Advance HE has several accreditation packages that are nationally and internationally recognised best practice approaches, providing assurance to stakeholders that the member institutions strive for excellence. Athena SWAN helps member institutions meet their equality legislation requirements, as well as offering a range of support mechanisms to help institutions enhance their practice and achieve recognition for their

commitment to gender equality to fulfil the requirements of some funders and research councils<sup>ii</sup>.

Athena SWAN comprises of a system of three award categories (ECU, 2015): Bronze (solid foundations to tackle gender inequalities), Silver (demonstration of internal impact) and Gold (exemplary actions with external impact). Awards are granted by following an accountability framework that involves several topics: representation, career progression, progression of students into academia, the working environment for members of staff and intersectionality<sup>iii</sup>.

By late 2020, there have been nearly 1000 awards in the UK and Ireland since Athena SWAN was established in 2005<sup>iv</sup>. This number reflects the interest by HE in receiving an Athena SWAN award. However, despite the interest<sup>v</sup>, the rate of successful applications only recently has been rated as ‘high’<sup>vi</sup>. The rate of awards for Business Schools also seems relatively low, particularly given that Business Schools are attuned to accreditations, like AACSB and EQUIS. As of October 2020, there were only 25 Business Schools out of approximately 120 in the UK who had received an Athena SWAN award. From this total, only two are Silver (University of Warwick Business School and Queen’s University Belfast Business School)<sup>vii</sup>.

Advance HE has commissioned four reports to evaluate Athena SWAN’s impact on gender equality (Buckingham, 2020; Graves et al., 2019; Hawkes, 2011; Munir et al., 2014). These report positive impacts in many aspects, such as staff career progression and promotion, the possibilities of flexible work, a fair distribution of workload, the visibility of women in senior posts as well as improvements in communication and engagement. However, barriers are still evident in terms of difficulties in changing organizational cultures, supporting maternity leave and involvement of students because some research (e.g. Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016)

suggests that many HE institutions do not take advantage of external support such as that given by Athena SWAN. Davies and Healey (2017) find that while Athena SWAN can identify gendered differences in such things as publication, the development of policies such as mentoring will actually cause change.

The published academic literature mostly centres on assessing the impact of Athena SWAN in the context of medicine. Caffrey et al. (2016), for example, finds that Athena SWAN has a great potential to create a space for a debate on gender equality. However, Caffrey et al. (2016) argue that Athena SWAN potentially reinforces gendered inequalities since it can increase the workload of women who are often champions of this initiative. Ovseiko et al. (2017; 2019) also investigate the context of academic medical sciences and report that Athena SWAN had a positive impact in supporting women's career progression and improved actions on caring responsibilities (e.g. supporting pregnancy and return to work). Later work by Ovseiko et al. (2020) suggests that Athena SWAN challenges discrimination and bias by promoting, for example, staff training, especially if it is tied to funding as it increases the rate of women leading on projects. By examining the action plan of a Silver Awarded medical school, Schmidt et al. (2020) highlight that successful action plans need to be adaptable in order to address the complex nature of gender inequality that is both structural and cultural. Finally, Gregory-Smith (2015, 2018) studies Athena SWAN in medical schools and finds that although qualitative perceptions of equality is improved, there is no significant impact of Athena SWAN on improving the development of female careers.

In a broader study, Xiao et al. (2020) examine nearly 150 UK HE providers which had received an Athena SWAN Award. They find that there is a positive correlation with gaining an award and faster growth in gender diversity in leadership positions. International rankings also

increase with Bronze and, especially, Silver Awards. O'Connor (2020), however, using a feminist institutional approach, is less optimistic about the ability of Athena SWAN to generate significant change and interprets the research on Athena SWAN as showing potential for change, but it cannot make substantial change in gender inequalities because of institutional and cultural barriers. Tzanakou and Pearce (2019) suggest even more strongly that Athena SWAN creates only a 'moderate' form of change as it is embedded in a 'neoliberal' accountability framework. Contrasting with Schmidt et al. (2020), they argue that Athena SWAN is not complex enough to address the fundamental problems of gender inequality in HE.

Similar to STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine), Business Schools are not immune from gender inequality. There is significant underrepresentation of women in many Business School disciplines, and lack of female role models in leadership positions, as well as a significant gender pay gap (Flynn et al., 2015; McTiernan & Flynn, 2011). While studies show an improvement in the number of female academics and students over the years in some disciplines and degrees, the literature highlights that there is a perceived discrimination on the basis of gender in staff appointment, promotion and payment (AMBA, S/N; Jordan et al., 2006; Lord & Robb, 2010; Roseberry et al. 2016). Studies also show how female academics in accounting departments in Business Schools are more often in pastoral care roles 'as a means of fulfilling the pastoral and administrative components of universities', than doing research, publishing and engaging in academic networking where academic 'success' is often typified (Haynes & Fearfull, 2008: 185). The expansion of the Athena SWAN charter from STEMM to arts, humanities, social sciences, business and law in May 2015 was to recognise and address such gender inequalities and to support and embed equality for staff and students in Business Schools and other nonSTEMM disciplines.

There is emerging evidence that the lockdown and the closure of physical campuses have had a detrimental impact on women in HE. In a recent working paper, Amano-Patiño et al. (2020) finds that there are large differences in economics research specifically on COVID-19 with only 12% of authors being women compared to around 20% women authors in nonCOVID-19 research. However, it is too early to identify the reasons for these publication patterns as most lockdowns and significant changes to work practice have only been in force for about one year and are only now lifting. Utoft (2020) auto-ethnographically highlights the challenges for single female academics during the initial responses to the pandemic. She argues that what is commonly meant by ‘work-life’ balance is really ‘work-family’ balance. The change to home working has meant little ability to separate work from life since work now takes place in the home. Gao and Sai (2020) also discuss the professional and social isolation that have negatively impacted the work of women and the challenges of virtual meetings to fill these gaps.

Our paper contributes to the above literature in three different but complementary ways. First, in contrast to the previous literature which focuses primarily on medical schools, our emphasis is to explore the context of UK Business Schools. Second, our paper compares and contrasts gender inequalities in HE before and immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic. Third, our paper questions the Athena SWAN framework as an effective mechanism to govern gender inequalities in times of instability by using concepts of governmentality rather than through previous lenses such as complexity theory (Schmidt et al., 2020) or (feminist) institutional theory (O’Connor, 2020; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019) for the reasons we set out below.



### **3. Theoretical Perspective**

Foucault calls governmentality the implementation of ‘processes, analysis and reflections’ to measure success or failure that conveys an exercise of power by authorities’ judgement (Foucault, 1979: 20). Foucault argues that the knowledge acquired from these control technologies creates a sense of visibility among subjects and makes them self-governable. Thus, technologies possess disciplinary power to control behaviour at a distance, replacing the need for constant physical monitoring (Foucault, 1970). Foucault (1970) stresses that these control techniques guide and shape an agent’s behaviours, which in turn are normalized towards a certain objective. Moreover, control systems are used to define and categorise agents, guiding agents towards normalization so that these mechanisms of control can shape (as well as distort) reality (Miller, 2001; Taylor, 1996). As an example, Foucault says that classifying individuals by their sexuality can become an object of control, exposing individuals to different treatments in different contexts, like in work and religion (Foucault, 1990 [1976]; Taylor, 1996).

More specifically, technologies of government are defined as ‘intellectual’ control mechanisms because they produce a capacity for individuals to self-regulate and become the subject of norms, which are created by a selected range of experts (Miller & Rose, 1990). These technologies are also called ‘modern’ forms of government because they are designed to make failures evident in order to hold individuals accountable for their actions without closer physical monitoring (Miller & Rose, 1990). Thus, information generated by these technologies are not neutral but ‘performative’, making reference to norms against which an individual should be measured via a process of ‘evaluation, calculation and intervention’ (Miller & Rose, 1990; Rose & Miller, 1992).

Finally, these technologies have been referred as ‘mundane’ because they can be found everywhere, and that is the reason why Foucault mentions they are of relevance if forms of government are to be explored (Miller & Rose, 1990). For example, control technologies can emerge in formats like training on standardisation, forms, documents, reports, surveys, tables, presentations and professional vocabularies (Miller & Rose, 1990; Rose & Miller, 1992). These technologies also can engage individuals with organisations’ objectives at political, economic and social levels (Miller & Rose, 1990). Therefore, individual experience at the workplace can be problematized and acted upon so that concerns can be reorganised to maintain productivity by emphasising self-reflection of individuals’ rights and responsibility (Miller & Rose, 1995).

Athena SWAN can be viewed as a form of governmentality. It operates via 10 principles<sup>viii</sup> which an organisation needs to self-assess against to have their performance hierarchically categorised into Bronze, Silver or Gold<sup>ix</sup>. Thus, Athena SWAN constructs the reality of performance levels on equality and diversity. The process of the Athena SWAN Award subjects individuals and organisations to its principles which reflect the conduct of the sector being endorsed, at distance, by Advance HE. An applicant for an Athena SWAN award comprehends a written application following a standard framework from which the level of commitment on equality and diversity will be assessed by the HE. Thus, the information reported in the application is not neutral but designed to align the interests of the applicant with the ‘regulatory’ authority.

Our study critically explores the Athena SWAN Award in the Business Schools’ context during COVID-19. We argue that the COVID-19 pandemic is bringing a new dimension to the working environment. On the one hand, it has isolated workers in their homes challenging the functioning of organisations. On the other hand, technology is bridging the distance between

homes, workers and organisations (Parker, 2020). We apply this research to the Business Schools' context by emphasising that Athena SWAN establishes forms of control in a neoliberal context where metrics are crucial to measure performance and 'normalise' as well as 'marketize' gender issues (Dar & Ibrahim, 2019; Mackay, 2021; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019).

Business Schools are an interesting case study because they tend to benchmark themselves while obtaining accreditations<sup>x</sup> and engaging with rankings in a search to enhance their reputation in the sector (Casile & Davis-Blake, 2002; Cooper et al., 2014; Julian & Ofori-Dankwa, 2006). Accreditations and rankings have a significant impact on recruitment and retention of students and staff, signalling a status of quality, competitive advantage and business success (Dillard & Tinker, 1996; Prasad et al. 2018; Wilson & McKiernan, 2011). Thus, in the Business School context, reputation can be governed to maintain a market position and Athena SWAN can be used as part of this process (Mackay, 2021).

#### **4. Research methods**

The text below describes the criteria adopted in our qualitative study. This description follows the criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) suggested by Tong et al. (2007).

##### **4.1 Secondary data**

This study involves an analysis of eleven applications from UK Business Schools with an Athena SWAN award by January 2020 (see Table 1). Normally, Athena SWAN applications are available on the Business School's webpages. Contact was made with some Business Schools which had not uploaded their applications and a variety of reasons were given when some of these schools could not share their applications with us. For example, one school

mentioned that their application included personal data, while another Business School was in the midst of resubmission and therefore did not share the application.

#### 4.2 Primary data

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Athena SWAN leaders/Heads of School (HoS). Interview questions involved a range of Athena SWAN topics as well as more specific questions on COVID-19. These topics were designed using ‘rationality of government’ concepts suggested by Gordon (1991) as well as ‘analytics of government’ questions suggested by Dean (1999:33) (see Table 2). All UK Business Schools for which we had access to their application were invited for an interview in July 2020 and interviews took place between July and August 2020. An initial email was sent to the HoS asking for permission to speak to the Athena SWAN leaders in the School. After receiving permission, contact was made with Athena SWAN leaders to invite them for an interview. A total of seven interviews were conducted, including six Athena SWAN leaders and one HoS who had volunteered to take part at the interviews. All Athena SWAN leaders were women and the HoS was a man. The Athena SWAN leaders who were contacted for the interviews but had not accepted, either asked to have their interviews postponed to another time later in the year or did not reply to our enquiry.

All authors in this paper (two women and one man) collected primary and secondary data. Only the authors and participants participated in the interview. All authors attended the interviews except when there were clashes with other prearranged commitments or the relationship between participant and researchers could potentially influence interviewees’ responses. At the time of data collection, all authors were working full time at HE, in the positions of Senior Lectureship or Professorship. All researchers had a PhD. Two authors were former Athena

SWAN leaders, and one author is still a member of the Athena SWAN Self-Assessment Team (SAT) in the authors' Business School<sup>xi</sup>.

The research procedures were approved by the Ethics Committee of the institution to which the authors are affiliated. Interviews lasted for 49 minutes on average, and they were held online via Microsoft Teams. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Extensive notes were taken before and after the interviews.

#### 4.3 Data analysis

Deductive thematic analysis was used to explore the Athena SWAN applications and interviews (Boyatzis, 1998; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2010; Joffe & Yardley, 2004). Based on the themes from the literature review on governmentality (see Table 2), a qualitative analysis of applications and interviews were done manually by two authors. We used the results of secondary data (applications) analysis as a triangulation of data with the results we found in primary data (interviews).

### **5. Results and discussion**

We analysed Athena SWAN applications to understand how these documents constructed concepts of gender inequalities in HE before COVID-19. Table 3 summarises these findings into four main themes: (i) the gendered distribution of students and staff, (ii) supporting and advancing women's careers, (iii) flexible working and managing career breaks, and (iv) the organisational culture and staff-student wellbeing. Each theme was then categorised into sub-themes to identify the gender issues being governed by the Athena SWAN framework.

Next, we evaluated how the gender issues found in Table 3 have been governed by Business Schools. For this purpose, we analysed the applications further, along with the interview data, to identify the themes of governmentality suggested by Gordon (1991:3) and Dean (1999). Table 2 presents examples of each of these four themes through a series of questions. (1) How is gender equality and diversity governed in the Business School context? (2) What are the mechanisms of control implemented by Athena SWAN? (3) What became visible (or invisible) because of Athena SWAN? (4) What are the duties/rights/conduct of individuals involved with Athena SWAN (or the lack of such duties/rights/conduct)?

Finally, we further analysed the applications and interview data, following a triangulation, to understand how the limitations of Athena SWAN before COVID-19 influenced the lack of accountability and action on gender issues in periods of crisis. The results of our analysis are presented in the following sections.

### 5.1 Governing gender equality and diversity: The context of Business Schools

We start this section by exploring strategies of power governing gender equality and diversity in the Business School context. This provides us an understanding of their strategy while shaping and normalising behaviour in unforeseen situations such as COVID-19 (Foucault, 2007). For example, we have identified a set of mixed strategies adopted by Business Schools while engaging in gender issues. The first strategy was a departmental interest to change the culture and tackle gender issues in line with the overarching strategy of School.

*“Well, we’re highly committed to, and in particular, under [HoS name] leadership, you know, to... with the university strategy and the Business School strategy of inclusion and diversity and equality, and it fitted within that strategy,*

*really. So yeah, it was high on the agenda. Also to change the culture in the Business School.” (I6)*

At the same time, we found other strategies, specially related to the Business Schools’ position on accreditations and their possibility to increase sources of funding. This finding suggests that some Business Schools are interested in a type of government that requires measurement of performance to problematise experiences and exert disciplinary power (Foucault, 1970) to gain and secure competitive advantage (Miller & Rose, 1990). This is consistent with the literature that mentions Athena SWAN as part of a neoliberal government strategy and, sometimes, is used to ‘marketize’ gender issues (Mackay, 2021; O’Connor, 2020; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019).

*“...So the way we work in our Business School is that individuals are looking after particular accreditations and, so this is why I am looking after the Athena SWAN accreditation...”(I3)*

Accreditations, awards and positions in rankings seem to be interconnected to govern in an orchestrated manner and at a distance (Miller & Rose, 1990), thereby overlapping a set of themes. This can be, simultaneously, a positive impact on gender equality as well as a limiting factor since commitments are preconditioned to a certain performance level so to not interfere in HE competitive advantage.

*“We just had our [name of the accreditation system] reaccreditation visit just a few weeks ago, and one of the things that they said in their final findings back to the school, was our senior female professors, our numbers are just too low. They’re not equivalent to other schools. And actually, for me, I was really*

*pleased to hear that because the fact that they've now said that in our [name of the accreditation system] conditions, that's going to give the school an impetus to actually really address that..." (I1)*

COVID-19 is an unforeseen situation that has brought tremendous pressure and increased inequalities for women in academia (see above). However, the motivation to react to pandemic-driven inequality may be de-emphasised as most Business Schools appear to not promote changes beyond what is required by external structures of power, such as accreditation and rankings (Miller & Rose, 1990; Rose & Miller, 1992).

## 5.2 How are gender issues controlled at the individual level?

From the analysis of the applications, we found that intervention at a distance (Foucault, 1970) has been applied through the collection of data via surveys, interviews and focus groups, although applicants found the data collected as not always robust and sometimes ambiguous. This finding echoes the literature that stresses that data collection is crucial in Athena SWAN to establish a business case for change (Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019), even in the context of COVID-19.

*"Well, it'll be from an evidence base, so it'll be from the next staff survey and then we'll find out what the evidence is and base it on that. The staff survey has been put back, obviously, we couldn't do it in May with all the changes that were going on [due to the COVID-19 pandemic], to put everything online." (I6)*

However, the lack of physical communication and extensive work required in the transition to online teaching are mentioned as impediments to gather statistics on the impact of COVID-19.



This was an obstacle to disseminate power and control at the ‘mundane’ level, causing the disengagement of individuals and an absence of self-reflection on issues about gender equality and diversity during the pandemic (Miller & Rose, 1990). Some leaders mentioned that they were limited to informal discussions and evaluations of the situation instead of significantly embedding responses to the impact of COVID-19 in their action plans.

*“It’s quite difficult at the moment [COVID-19 pandemic] isn’t it because as you know, every university is trying to get everything online at the moment, so there was a lot of work to be done, and I think that is the counter pressure, whilst you want to be sensitive to the issues, there’s also work to be done. What we have done is created the social environments for people to approach us if they are really struggling.” (15)*

Another key finding is that being a female Athena SWAN lead can, actually, widen gender inequality, especially during the crisis when everyone was struggling to maintain Athena SWAN tasks as well as the normal academic responsibilities of teaching and research, as suggested in this quote:

*“ Then COVID happens,... I haven’t seen anyone physically from work, and obviously all the challenges that working from home brings and trying to work from home with children and everything, so it’s been a difficult time. So the action plan that we should now be implementing is slow in being implemented, partly because personally as the chair I’ve not been able to prioritise Athena SWAN because I have not been able to even prioritise my main job, if I can say main job,*

*like research and teaching and admin because I've been stuck at home with children. So yeah, that's the main thing really.” (I3)*

This is evidence of a constant self-evaluation to compare individual performance against the standardised set of rules in place in normal circumstances (Miller & Rose, 1995) and in a set of structures developed to accommodate standards of life more suitable to men (O'Connor, 2020; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019).

The COVID-19 situation was highlighted by interviewees as unprecedented and past Athena SWAN data are likely to be very different compared to data during the pandemic. The negative impact of COVID-19 for data collection to support Athena SWAN applications was considerable and comparisons of data before, during and after the pandemic will be difficult. Thus, the self-evaluation (Foucault, 1970) of the impact of the framework in which Athena SWAN will sustain its level of governmentality and control will be limited.

*“...this year we sort of made the decision earlier, you know, after the COVID thing broke, that really trying to look at student numbers in terms of gender or indeed race, is not going to be particularly easy, because it's not going to be a typical year [due to the pandemic], so are we 5% better or 10% better, well who knows because it's going to be much more up in the air this year.”(I7)*

The interviews also revealed a tendency to respond to the pandemic's impact from a non-gendered perspective, which indicated an apparent invisibility of the gendered impact of COVID-19. According to Foucault, this suggested a lack of classification and so, the impossibility of a differentiated treatment when it is actually needed (Foucault, 1990 [1976];

Taylor, 1996). For example, in response to the question of whether the gendered impact of COVID-19 had been discussed within the Athena SWAN committee, one participant stated that:

*“...we’ve not particularly separated it [the gendered impact of COVID-19 on male and female]. I mean, we’ve talked about it a lot. We’ve not particularly separated out whether it’s more female than male. I think we’re just generally thinking about what support we can make available to faculty.” (I1)*

The result confirmed some ‘performative’ characteristics (Miller & Rose, 1990; Rose & Miller, 1992) implicit in Athena SWAN processes. For example, the application reveals that there was a tendency to neutralise gender gap issues by using benchmarking with data from the Higher Education Statistic Agency (HESA), enabling justification of such gap with no detailed exploration. Another interesting finding was the use of language to exert control. For example, when statistics show more women, adjectives of superiority are used, such as ‘females dominate’, ‘proportion of female applicants is far higher than male’, etc. (e.g. Application 5). Similarly, statistical tests are used to justify superiority of women when there are small differences between men and women, whereas statistics favourable to men tend to be neutralized.

*“Females dominate in line with benchmarks and the HR sector in general..”(A5)*

*“The proportion of female applicants is far higher than other programmes at around 60%.”(A5)*

Moreover, in the absence of statistics, Athena SWAN leaders shared their perceptions of potential impacts of COVID-19 on gender issues. Areas highlighted by leaders in interviews

overlap with the themes included in the application analysis in Table 3 which will be discussed in the next paragraphs.

There is a mixed interpretation of flexible work in relation to the number of working hours, location of work and period of the day the work was done (e.g. day or night). Definitely, COVID-19 showed that working from home is possible. However, some interviewees mentioned that working from home, in times of a pandemic, would not mean working ‘flexibly’ due to the other household tasks (e.g. home schooling, washing, cleaning, etc.) involved in periods of lockdown. Rather, working from home meant the accumulation of tasks and, in some occasions, an inability to work the contractual hours required:

*“..., more often than not women end up being the care givers in the home, and I’ve spoken to several people who you know, their partners or husbands have been working from home as well and have a higher paid job and everyone’s worried about their jobs, and they’ve ended up doing the childcare. I’ve had... I’ve got one colleague who starts work at 6.00 in the morning, she works from 6.00 until 12.00 and then her husband works and... that is a lot of pressure. So there are definitely some gender inequalities arising from COVID, yeah.”(I5)*

Probation and research were also raised as concerns. Some actions recognised the impact of COVID-19 on probation, but for research outside probation, there is no evidence of specific actions. In the absence of hard data, leaders tended to find evidence from external sources to normalise (Foucault, 2007) the ‘informal’ information that research (including publications and grant applications) can be affected due to home commitments, such as childcare and elderly

care arrangements which typically fall on women and create unequal pressure for women to keep up with their male counterparts.

*“...we’ve got this six-year probation period for our junior faculty, and so an email has gone out recently from our Vice Dean of [area of responsibility] saying that people can apply for extensions... if it’s affected their research and their output [due to the pandemic]. And particularly it’s things like childcare, home schooling, care of elderly people, all of that sort of stuff. Mental health issues.”(11)*

*“This lockdown that we’ve just been through due to COVID, I feel like the inequality issues have just been highlighted even more. The publishing houses are already reporting disproportionate submissions from males, male academics because male academics perhaps even if they’re fathers, they can be in their study at home while the female is taking on more of the home roles, the cleaning, the cooking, the sorting, the playing. But then I don’t want to feel as though I’m slagging off the men either, but ... there are statistics and figures out there that shows that this is happening and it’s worrying, and I just feel passionately that it shouldn’t be in that... everything should be fair.”(13)*

Finally, there were discussions about stress and anxiety due to the pressure to quickly move activities online. This is mostly related to technical skills required to provide a professional online learning experience as well as a prioritisation of teaching over research.

*“ There’s clearly different levels of stress and anxiety regarding people’s ability to work in connection with their caring responsibilities [during the pandemic]. There’s a continual tension over learning and teaching taking priority and the worries people have about that regarding their career progression with respect to... for example, on a research and teaching contract.” (I4)*

The foundations to tackle gender inequalities might be shaken due to unprecedented uncertainties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore, it is important to identify the deficiencies caused by uncertainties to sustain an appropriated governmentality on inequalities that goes beyond frameworks and boundaries which are constructed to represent good practices. While it is important to understand that the Athena SWAN award is a guidance for tackling inequalities, it does not dismiss the responsibilities that Business Schools should have with gendered inequalities, despite the existence (or not) of an Athena SWAN award.

### 5.3 Conflicts of power and accountability

The applications analysis showed that although the Athena SWAN SAT encompasses of a diverse group of members based on different social categories and personal experiences spanning gender, race, class, ethnicity and nationality, there is a lack of clarity in terms of the role female members and leaders have in the structure of the Business Schools and the SAT. In most of the applications, there is a group (e.g. the Dean and executive team) that take decisions where SAT members are, at best, invited to attend on an ad hoc basis, and the responsibilities of the SAT are, mainly, to implement the decisions of the executive team. Very few Heads of Business Schools are members of the SAT (e.g. Application 3 mentioned the

Dean as a member of the SAT) and very few show females leading a Business School (e.g. Applications 2 and 3 are examples).

*“Equality is a personal and professional priority, reflected in my role as SAT Chair... [Quote by a female Head of the School in an application]” (A3)*

The interviews revealed that there are some limitations of the executive teams in Business Schools in recognising the gendered issues caused by COVID-19. These limitations were presented in many ways by interviewees. For example, the results of a survey were presented to the executive team, and there was resistance to recognise that women might have been affected differently compared to men. This finding may be evidence that, in some occasions, technologies of control normally applied in the Athena SWAN context (e.g. surveys) are ineffective to support a business case in higher levels of organisations (Miller, 2001; Taylor, 1996). In line with the analysis of the applications, this result suggests evidence of the lack of authority the Athena SWAN leader may face to problematize and tackle concerns raised by self-evaluation in the workplace (Miller & Rose, 1995). Finally, this finding can reflect the impact of unbalanced levels of gender diversity in senior positions in Business Schools which can, potentially, prevent control of gender issues (Xiao et al., 2020).

*“This was discussed with the [name of the area – senior management] and they were very uncomfortable about the fact that I was insisting... I wasn’t insisting, that I was suggesting that the women, or female academics and colleagues might be more affected than men as they argued that men were also parents and they were also facing the same issues.”(I5)*

In sum, there is a lack of visibility on the type of self-evaluation and accountability to be rendered by the Athena SWAN leaders and the executive team of the School. Making inefficiencies visible is one of the main criteria for an effective government at distance (Foucault, 1970). When this is not the case, the governmentality in place is weak, preventing the objectives agreed with the controlling authority to be achieved and representing only a symbolic intention from the organisation under control (Miller & Rose, 1995).

## **6. Conclusions**

This research is the first known study to explore Athena SWAN as a mechanism to govern gender equality and diversity in HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. Theoretically informed by governmentality, this study analyses Athena SWAN applications and interviews with Athena SWAN leaders in UK Business Schools. Our findings highlight how gender issues are governmentalised by Athena SWAN within Business Schools before and during the pandemic. In particular, the Athena SWAN framework is supposed to build a foundation to tackle gender inequality, thereby managing gender inequality issues by creating an awareness of these inequalities. However, we argue that the structures of control developed to manage gender inequality in non-pandemic times may not produce visible actions during a pandemic.

Through our analysis, we demonstrate how such invisibility might work against women during COVID-19. Invisibility happens in two main ways. First, our interviews reveal an absence of specific and hard data collected within the Business Schools on the gendered impact of COVID-19. Second, there is a lack of visible authority conferred to Athena SWAN leaders to implement action plans as well as an unclear assignation of responsibilities to School management on issues related to gender equality and diversity. Invisibility prevents self-



reflection through accountability of inefficiencies, which is one of the main characteristics to an effective control at a distance.

Another relevant aspect is the invested strategies showed by Business Schools to administer gender equality and diversity. While our participants expressed that Business Schools are committed to changing the gendered culture and tackling gender issues, there are other driving forces that govern their gender equality practices. For some Schools, the focus seems to be led by rankings, accreditations and awards, and potentially funding to keep a competitive advantage. This is not surprising given that economic rationality in corporatised HE sector arguably places value on an individualised notion of graduate marketability more than the value of education as public investment (Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019). The linkage to accreditation and funding appear to create “perverse incentives” to bringing any substantive structural and cultural changes in relation to gender equality and diversity (Ovseiko et al., 2017 ). In this context, actions on gender equality and diversity are welcome if they are aligned with the control of competitive advantage. This result reinforces an orchestrated approach towards marketization of gender issues to guarantee sustainable sources of resources. When gender issues are combined with the management of wealth, there is a risk of inequalities to become even worse (Taylor, 2011). This is because the existence of inequalities can justify maximization of wealth and consequently, secure the perpetuation of the current *status quo*.

We believe that this study’s findings have the potential to highlight the effects of COVID-19 in widening the gender gap in HE. They suggest a gendered perspective in developing policy responses by HE to address the inequalities caused by COVID-19 to bring genuine structural changes. We are aware that Business Schools, which took part in this research, may have received the Athena SWAN award before the pandemic and that actions to tackle the effect of

the pandemic may have not been formalised in their action plan. However, we understand that Athena SWAN requires continuous self-assessment. Therefore, the Schools should be aware and implement mechanisms to collect evidence (e.g. questionnaires, focus groups, etc) of relevant changes in the School and adapt the action plan, if necessary. We have seen from our data that some Schools (lead by actions taken at the University level) showed a very proactive approach collecting evidence of inequalities during the pandemic, allowing quick responses to some emerging inequalities. Nevertheless, this was not always the case in the Business School contexts, even though some Schools mentioned they were working on the tools to collect evidence of impact because they could not change the action plan without formal evidence.

We are, however, mindful to the limitation that the study explores the gendered impact of COVID-19 in HE and how Athena SWAN addresses in earlier periods. It is possible that the effect of Athena SWAN may become more pronounced over longer periods. Future research may explore how the Athena SWAN framework addresses the gendered impact of a crisis over longer periods to gain understanding and inform future practices. Another venue for future research is to explore the perceptions of Senior Management of HE and Business Schools on the struggles of power to act on gender equality and diversity beyond the performance control invested in awards, accreditations and rankings. In line with this, we encourage further research to explore the real motivation or commitment of Business Schools to gender equality, as well as the role of Athena SWAN as a standard in shaping gender equality and diversity in Higher Education.

## **References:**

- Abdellatif, A., & Gatto, M. (2020). It's OK not to be OK: Shared reflections from two PhD parents in a time of pandemic Gender. *Work and Organization, Advance online publication*. doi:10.1111/gwao.12465
- Amano-Patiño, N., Faraglia, E., Giannitsarou, C., & Hasna, Z. (2020). The Unequal Effects of COVID-19 on Economists' Research Productivity. *Cambridge Working Papers in Economics #2038*.
- AMBA. (S/N). Closing the gap: How far from gender equality are AMBA-accredited Business Schools? Retrieved from <https://www.associationofmbas.com/research/closing-the-gap-how-far-from-gender-equality-are-amba-accredited-business-schools/>
- Averett, K. (2020). A feminist public sociology of the pandemic: Interviewing about a crisis, during a crisis. *Gender, Work and Organization*. doi:10.1111/gwao.12616
- Baltaru, R.-D. (2020). The Rise of Agentic Inclusion in the UK Universities: Maintaining Reputation through (Formal) Diversification. *Studies in Higher Education, Advanced online publication*. doi:10.1080/03075079.2020.1739015
- Boyatzis, R. (1998). *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development Paperback*. London: Sage.
- Buckingham, J. (2020). *The future of Athena SWAN: The report of the Athena SWAN Charter Review Independent Steering Group for Advance HE*. Retrieved from [http://www.ecu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Future-of-Athena-SWAN\\_Report-1.pdf](http://www.ecu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Future-of-Athena-SWAN_Report-1.pdf)
- Caffrey, L., Wyatt, D., Fudge, N., Mattingley, H., Williamson, C., & McKeivitt, C. (2016). Gender equity programmes in academic medicine: a realist evaluation approach to Athena SWAN processes. *BMJ Open*(6), 1-9. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2016-012090
- Casile, M., & Davis-Blake, A. (2002). When accreditation standards change: Factors affecting differential responsiveness of public and private organizations. *Academy of Management Journal*, 45(1), 180-195. doi:10.5465/3069291.
- Clavijo, N. (2020). Reflecting upon vulnerable and dependent bodies during the Covid-19 crisis. *Gender, Work and Organization, Advance online publication*. doi:10.1111/gwao.12460
- Cooper, S., Parkes, S., & Blewitt, J. (2014). Can accreditation help a leopard change its spots?: Social accountability and stakeholder engagement in business schools. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 27(2), 234-258. doi:10.1108/AAAJ-07-2012-01062
- Dar, S., & Ibrahim, Y. (2019). The Blackened body and White governmentality: Managing the UK academy and the production of shame. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 26, 1241-1254. doi:10.1111/gwao.12395
- David, M. E. (2015). Women and Gender Equality in Higher Education? *Education sciences*, 5, 10-25. doi:10.3390/educsci5010010
- Davies, C., & Healey, R. (2017). Hacking through the Gordian Knot: Can Facilitating Operational Mentoring Untangle the Gender Research Productivity Puzzle in Higher Education? *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(1), 31-44. doi:10.1080/03075079.2017.1333494
- Dean, M. (1999). *Governmentality: Power and rule in modern society*. Sage: London.
- Deloitte. (2020). *COVID-19 and impacts on the higher education sector*. Retrieved from <https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/public-sector/articles/covid-19-and-impacts-on-the-higher-education-sector.html>

- Dillard, J. F., & Tinker, T. (1996). Commodifying business and accounting education: The implications of accreditation. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 7, 215-225. doi: 10.1006/cpac.1996.0027
- ECU. (2015). Awards handbook. Retrieved from <https://www.ecu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/ECU-Handbook-26.05.15-FINAL.pdf>
- ECU. (2018). How far have women come in Higher Education? . Retrieved from <https://www.ecu.ac.uk/blogs/far-women-come-higher-education/>
- Eriksson, P., & Kovalainen, A. (2010). *Qualitative Methods in Business Research*. London: Sage.
- Flynn, P. M., Cavanagh, K., & Bilimoria, D. (2015). Gender equality in business schools: The elephant in the room. In P. M. Flynn, K. Haynes, & M. Kilgour (Eds.), *Integrating Gender Equality into Business and Management Education: Lessons Learned and Challenges Remaining*. Abingdon: Greenleaf Publishing.
- Foucault, M. (1970). *The order of things*. London: Tavistock.
- Foucault, M. (1979). On governmentality. *Ideology and Consciousness*, 6, 5–22.
- Foucault, M. (1990 [1976]). *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, trans. R. Hurley. London: Penguin Books.
- Galizzi, G., & Siboni, B. (2016). Positive Action Plans in Italian Universities: Does Gender Really Matter? *Meditari Accountancy Research*, 24(2), 246-268. doi:10.1108/MEDAR-09-2015-0062
- Gao, G., & Sai, L. (2020). Towards a ‘virtual’ world: Social isolation and struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic as single women living alone. *Gender, Work and Organization*, Advance online publication. doi:10.1111/gwao.12468
- Gordon, C. (1991). Governmental Rationality: An Introduction. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault Effect Studies in Governmentality*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Graves, A., Rowell, A., & Hunsicker, E. (2019). *An Impact Evaluation of the Athena SWAN Charter*. Retrieved from <https://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/an-impact-evaluation-of-the-athena-swan-charter-2019/>:
- Gregory-Smith, I. (2015). *The impact of Athena SWAN in UK medical schools. The University of Shiefeld, Shiefeld Economic Research Paper Series, Department of Economics*.
- Gregory-Smith, I. (2018). Positive action towards gender equality: Evidence from the Athena SWAN Charter in UK Medical Schools. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 56(3), 463–483. doi:10.1111/bjir.12252
- Guy, B., & Arthur, B. (2020). Academic motherhood during COVID-19: Navigating our dual roles as educators and mothers. *Gender Work and Organization*, 27(5), 887-899. doi:10.1111/gwao.12493
- Hawkes, S. (2011). *Athena SWAN: Charter for women in science*. Retrieved from <https://www.ecu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Athena-SWAN-Impact-Report-2011-1.pdf>:
- Haynes, K., & Fearfull, A. (2008). Exploring ourselves Exploiting and resisting gendered identities of women academics in accounting and management. *Pacific Accounting Review*, 20(2), 185-204. doi:10.1108/01140580810892508
- Hennekam, S., & Shymko, Y. (2020). Coping with the COVID-19 crisis: Force majeure and gender performativity. *Gender, Work and Organization*, Advance online publication. doi:10.1111/gwao.12479
- Howe-Walsh, L., & Turnbull, S. (2016). Barriers to Women Leaders in Academia: Tales from Science and Technology. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(3), 415-428. doi:10.1080/03075079.2014.929102

- Joffe, H., & Yardley, L. (2004). Content and thematic analysis. In D. Marks & L. Yardley (Eds.), *Research Methods for Clinical and Health Psychology*. London: Sage.
- Jordan, C. E., Pate, G. R., & Clark, S. J. (2006). Gender Imbalance in Accounting Academia: Past and Present. *Journal of Education for Business*, *81*(3), 165-169. doi:10.3200/JOEB.81.3.165-169
- Julian, S. D., & Ofori-Dankwa, J. (2006). Is Accreditation Good for the Strategic Decision Making of Traditional Business Schools? *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, *5*(2), 225-233.
- Kamerlin, S., & Wittung-Stafshede, P. (2020). Female faculty: Why so few and why care? . *Chemistry – A European Journal*, *26*(38), 8319-8323. doi:10.1002/chem.202002522
- Lord, B., & Robb, A. (2010). Women students and staff in accountancy: The Canterbury tales. *Accounting History*, *15*(4), 529-558. doi:10.1177/1032373210372956
- Mackay, F. (2021). Dilemmas of an Academic Feminist as Manager in the Neoliberal Academy: Negotiating Institutional Authority, Oppositional Knowledge and Change. *Political Studies Review*, *19*(1), 75–95. doi:10.1177/1478929920958306
- McKinsey&Companay. (2020). *COVID-19: implications for business*. Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/risk/our-insights/covid-19-implications-for-business>:
- McTiernan, S., & Flynn, P. M. (2011). “Perfect storm” on the horizon for women business school deans? *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, *10*(2), 323-339.
- Miller, P. (2001). Governing by numbers: Why calculative practices matter. *Social Research*, *68*(2), 379-396.
- Miller, P., & Rose, N. (1990). Governing economic life. *Economy and Society* *19*, 1-31. doi:10.1080/03085149000000001
- Miller, P., & Rose, N. (1995). Production, identity, and democracy. *Theory and Society*, *24*, 427-467.
- Munir, F., Manson, C., McDermott, H., Morris, J., Bagilhole, B., & Nevil, B. (2014). *Evaluating the effectiveness and impact of the Athena SWAN Charter-Executive summary*. Retrieved from <https://www.ecu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/external/evaluating-the-effectiveness-and-impact-of-the-athena-swan-charter.pdf>:
- O’Connor, P. (2020). Why is it so difficult to reduce gender inequality in male-dominated higher educational organizations? A feminist institutional perspective. *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, *45*(2), 207-228. doi:10.1080/03080188.2020.1737903
- Ovseiko, P. V., Chapple, A., Edmunds, L. D., & Ziebland, S. (2017). Advancing gender equality through the Athena SWAN Charter for Women in Science: an exploratory study of women’s and men’s perceptions. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, *15*(12), 1-13. doi:10.1186/s12961-017-0177-9
- Ovseiko, P. V., Pololi, L. H., Edmunds, L. D., Civian, J. T., Daly, M., & Buchan, A. M. (2019). Creating a more supportive and inclusive university culture: a mixed-methods interdisciplinary comparative analysis of medical and social sciences at the University of Oxford. *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, *44*(2), 166-191. doi:10.1080/03080188.2019.1603880

- Ovseiko, P. V., Taylor, M., Gilligan, R. E., Birks, J., Elhussein, L., Rogers, M., . . . Buchan, A. M. (2020). Effect of Athena SWAN funding incentives on women's research leadership. *BMJ*. doi:10.1136/bmj.m3975
- Parker, L. (2020). The COVID-19 office in transition: cost, efficiency and the social responsibility business case. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*. doi:10.1108/AAAJ-06-2020-4609
- Parlak, S., Cakiroglu, O., & Gul, F. (2021). Gender roles during COVID-19 pandemic: The experiences of Turkish female academics. *Gender, Work and Organization*. doi:10.1111/gwao.12655
- Pereira, M. (2021). Researching gender inequalities in academic labor during the COVID-19 pandemic: Avoiding common problems and asking different questions. *Gender, Work and Organization*. doi:10.1111/gwao.12618
- Pinho-Gomes, A., Peters, S., Thompson, R., & Hockham, C. (2020). Where are the women? Gender Inequalities in COVID-19 research authorship. *BMJ Global Health*, 5(7), 1-4. doi:10.1136/bmjgh-2020-002922
- Plotnikof, M., Bramming, P., Branicki, L., Christiansen, L. H., Henley, K., Kivinen, N., . . . van Amsterdam, N. (2020). Catching a glimpse: Corona-life and its micro-politics in academia. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 27(5), 804-826. doi:10.1111/gwao.12481
- Prasad, A., Segarra, P., & Villanueva, C. E. (2018). Academic life under institutional pressures for AACSB accreditation: insights from faculty members in Mexican business schools. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(9), 1605-1618. doi:10.1080/03075079.2018.1458220
- Rose, N., & Miller, P. (1992). Political power beyond the State: Problematics of Government. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 43(2), 173-205. doi:10.2307/591464
- Roseberry, L., Remke, R., Klæsson, J., & Holgersson, T. (2016). The gender gap in European Business Schools: A leadership perspective. Retrieved from [https://ontheagenda.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/EFMD-Gender-Gap-Report-2016\\_ONLINE-kopi.pdf](https://ontheagenda.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/EFMD-Gender-Gap-Report-2016_ONLINE-kopi.pdf)
- Rosser, S., Barnard, S., Carnes, M., & Munir, F. (2019). Athena SWAN and advance: effectiveness and lessons learned. *The Lancet*, 393(10171), 604-608. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(18)33213-6
- Schmidt, E. K., Ovseiko, P. V., Henderson, L. R., & Kiparoglou, V. (2020). Understanding the Athena SWAN award scheme for gender equality as a complex social intervention in a complex system: analysis of Silver award action plans in a comparative European perspective. *Health Research Policy and Systems*. doi:10.1186/s12961-020-0527-x
- Taylor, C. (1996). Foucault on freedom and truth. *Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences*, II(2), 3-30. doi:10.1177/0090591784012002002
- Taylor, C. (2011). Biopower. In D. Taylor (Ed.), *Michael Foucault: Key concepts*. Durham: Acumen Publishing Limited.
- Times Higher Education. (2020a). *Juggling childcare with academia: female experiences in lockdown*. Retrieved from <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/juggling-childcare-academia-female-experiences-lockdown>
- Times Higher Education. (2020b). *Pandemic lockdown holding back female academics, data show*. Retrieved from <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/pandemic-lockdown-holding-back-female-academics-data-show>

- Tong, A., Sainsbury, P., & Craig, J. (2007). Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): a 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, 19(6), 349-357.
- Tzanakou, C., & Pearce, R. (2019). Moderate feminism within or against neoliberal university? The example of Athena SWAN. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 26(8), 1191-1211. doi:10.1111/gwo.12336
- UNESCO. (2012). *World Atlas on Gender Equality in Education*. Retrieved from <http://www.unesco.org/new/typo3temp/pics/d7af2fe604.jp>
- Utoft, E. (2020). All the single ladies' as the ideal academic during times of COVID-19? *Gender, Work and Organization*, Advance online publication. doi:10.1111/gwao.12478
- Viglione, G. (2020). Are women publishing less during the pandemic? Here's what the data say. *Nature*, 581(May), 365-366. doi:10.1038/d41586-020-01294-9
- Wilson, D., & McKiernan, P. (2011). Global Mimicry: Putting Strategic Choice Back on the Business School Agenda. *British Journal of Management*, 22(3), 457-469. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8551.2011.00765.x
- Wright, K., Haastrup, T., & Guerrina, R. (2021). Equalities in freefall? Ontological insecurity and the long-term impact of COVID-19 in the academy. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 28(S1), 163-167. doi:10.1111/gwao.12518
- Xiao, Y., Pinkney, E., Au, T. K. F., & Yip, P. S. F. (2020). Athena SWAN and gender diversity: A UK- based retrospective cohort study. *BMJ*. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2019-032915



Table 1: List of Business and Management Schools with Athena SWAN award on the 12th January 2020

1. Bangor Business School
2. Durham University Business School
3. Cardiff University Business School
4. Imperial College London Business School
5. Newcastle University Business School
6. Queen Mary University of London School of Business and Management
7. University of Aberdeen Business School
8. Norwich Business School (University of East Anglia)
9. University of Edinburgh School of Business
10. Adam Smith Business School (University of Glasgow)
11. University of Hertfordshire Business School
12. Kemmy Business School (University of Limerick)
13. Alliance Manchester Business School (University of Manchester)
14. Saïd Business School (University of Oxford)
15. Salford Business School (Salford University)
16. University of Strathclyde Business School
17. University of Warwick Business School
18. Swansea University School of Management
19. University of Bath School of Management
20. University of St Andrews School of Management

Source: <https://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan/athena-swan-members/>



Table 2: Themes on governmentality

<b>Governmental ity themes (Dean, 1999, Gordon, 1991)</b>	<b>How is gender equality and diversity governed in the Business School context?</b>	<b>What are the mechanisms of control implemented by Athena SWAN?</b>	<b>What became visible (or invisible) because of Athena SWAN?</b>	<b>What are duties/rights/conduct of individuals involved with Athena SWAN (or the lack of such duties/rights/conduct)?</b>
<b>Examples identified in Athena SWAN applications/ interviews</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uniformization of strategies on gender equality and diversity in line with University’s main strategy as well as demands from accreditations/ rankings.</li> <li>• During COVID-19 pandemic, schools did not show changes beyond the ones required by overarching structures mentioned above.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of statistics collected via surveys, interviews and focus groups. Many applications disclosed difficulties with accessibility and reliability of the data presented.</li> <li>• Action plans are in place monitoring data and processes. However, they fall short in promoting meaningful changes.</li> <li>• The lack of communication and extensive work required during the pandemic considerably affect data collection that is one of the Athena SWAN control mechanisms.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender differences are neutralised in applications by using justifications, such as: (i) Numbers are in line with Higher Education Statistics Agency benchmarking; (ii) lack of data to explore the differences identified in detail; (iii) use of adjectives of superiority when statistics favoured women.</li> <li>• Responses to the pandemic were delivered in a non-differentiated format between genders.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SAT composition was discussed in most applications with few Heads of School members of SAT.</li> <li>• Few applications detail the process to appoint the Athena SWAN leader and members of SAT. There was no clear description on the autonomy/authority of the Athena SWAN leader to implement the action plan.</li> <li>• Most Athena SWAN leaders were women who struggled to keep Athena SWAN responsibilities during COVID-19.</li> <li>• Disconnection between SAT and senior management in terms of implementing policies. During COVID-19, this issue was exacerbated by senior management not believing in a differentiated impact between women and men caused by the pandemic.</li> </ul>

**Source:** Business Schools’ Athena SWAN applications and interviews

Table 3: Findings from Athena SWAN applications

Themes	Sub-themes	Gender issues
<b>Gendered distribution of student and staff</b>	Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender stereotyping/ disparities across disciplines and programmes.</li> <li>• Students with caring responsibilities need support.</li> </ul>
	Academic and research staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gendered distribution of academic and professional members of staff, especially at senior levels.</li> <li>• Gender pay gap.</li> </ul>
<b>Supporting and advancing women's career</b>	Representation of women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Under-representation of women in committees, especially at senior levels.</li> <li>• Lack of transparency on committee member selection.</li> <li>• Higher proportion of women in fixed contract in lower grades.</li> <li>• Women not well served with opportunities to develop as researchers or leaders.</li> </ul>
	Recruitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lower conversion of short-listed women into offer.</li> </ul>
	Promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fewer women apply for promotion through the grades.</li> <li>• Inconsistencies in perceptions of usefulness induction and promotion training.</li> <li>• Lack of transparency in promotions process.</li> </ul>
	Submission to REF and research grants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women tend to be less eligible to REF.</li> <li>• Women of child-bearing age fall behind in REF submission, thereby research careers.</li> <li>• Women tend to take up more training and learning opportunities, though it is not reflected in women taking up senior roles.</li> <li>• Gender imbalance in grant applications.</li> </ul>
<b>Flexible working and managing career breaks</b>	Flexible working	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of awareness of flexible working possibilities.</li> <li>• Flexible and part-time workers may have same burdens as full-time.</li> </ul>
	Maternity/ Adoption leave	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of awareness of policies relating to maternity, paternity, shared parental leave, and returners programme.</li> <li>• Higher percentage of women feel that taking maternity/paternity leave is detrimental to their career.</li> <li>• Lack of support from HR to alleviate maternity concerns.</li> </ul>
	Work-life balance/ Workload	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gendered perceptions of workload allocation.</li> <li>• Lack of transparency on workload model and workload allocation.</li> </ul>
<b>Organisational culture and staff-student wellbeing</b>	Culture, psychological wellbeing, anxiety, domestic violence, bullying, etc	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More men than women perceive working environment inclusive.</li> <li>• Colleagues who have not directly experienced/witnessed any inequality do not think it exists as a problem.</li> </ul>

*Source:* Business Schools' Athena SWAN applications

## NOTES:

- 
- <sup>i</sup> <https://www.ecu.ac.uk/advance-he-faqs/>
- <sup>ii</sup> <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan-charter>
- <sup>iii</sup> <https://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan/>
- <sup>iv</sup> <https://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan/athena-swan-members/>. Both universities and departments/schools can apply for and earn Athena SWAN awards at the three levels. The research we conduct in this paper focuses just on ‘departmental’ awards for Business Schools in the UK.
- <sup>v</sup> The literature highlights that there was an increase interest in Athena SWAN in the UK in medicine due to requirements of the National Institute of Health and Research as well as Medical Research Council to provide evidence of management of gender equality and diversity (O’Connor, 2020; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019). In Ireland, major funding bodies have the Athena SWAN award as a condition for individual applications (O’Connor, 2020). Also in Ireland, Athena SWAN is located at the Higher Education Authority which allocates resources to the sector (O’Connor, 2020). The Business School context demonstrates a different institutional embeddedness of Athena SWAN, which is explored in more detail in the results of this paper.
- <sup>vi</sup> The April 2020 round had the highest success rate in nearly 10 years at 82%.  
<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/Record-rate-of-successful-Athena-Swan-applications-awarded-in-latest-round-of-results>
- <sup>vii</sup> <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan-charter/participants-and-award-holders#Department-Awards> There are more awards in closely related departments and schools. For example there are a small number (seven) of Schools or Departments of Economics which have Bronze awards, but most universities in the UK have Economics programmes in a Business or Management School.
- <sup>viii</sup> <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan-charter#principles>
- <sup>ix</sup> <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan-charter/applying-for-an-Athena-Swan-Charter-Award>
- <sup>x</sup> Some accreditations are specific to the sector, such as the one linked to the Association of MBAs (AMBA). Others are subject-oriented, such as accreditations from accountancy bodies.
- <sup>xi</sup> The views expressed in this research are not necessarily shared by the Business School the authors are affiliated. All errors and omissions are our own.