

The Self-Assessment Process

Purpose of the self-assessment team (SAT)

To participate in the Athena SWAN Charter, the submitting unit (e.g. university, department, research institute, faculty, institute of technology, etc.) will need to establish a strong and effective self-assessment team (SAT). Having an effective SAT and undertaking a thorough self-assessment is key to the success of an application and fundamentally, to the effectiveness of the process. A thorough self-assessment includes, but is not limited to the following activity:

- Reflecting on a range of quantitative and qualitative data to identify both challenges and opportunities with regards to gender equality
- Evaluating relevant policies, practices and activities
- Responding to the findings of the above and establishing gender equality-based priority areas and appropriate aspirations and targets
- Developing an evidence-based, comprehensive action plan to underpin advancement against the agreed priorities over the whole award period, after which time the unit will apply to renew or upgrade their award.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of actions undertaken on an ongoing basis, to ensure actions are delivering impact against objectives, and evolving the action plan in response to evaluation

Forming the SAT

How the SAT may be best structured depends on the submitting unit: you may have one large SAT with smaller sub-groups (that probably meet more often) to focus on specific activity, or one SAT that undertakes everything together.

Ultimately, you need the SAT to have authority. This needs to be conferred to the SAT, but the composition of the SAT is an important factor in its status. Once the SAT has reflected on the unit's progress and identified challenges, they need to decide how to get things done.

Participating in the SAT is a big commitment, and should be recognised accordingly. More detail on this is provided below. People need to be given the time to attend meetings and take responsibility for tasks. If senior leadership can communicate the SAT as an institutional priority with ultimate oversight at senior management level, then people may be more likely and willing to engage.

The Chair

The chair's role is crucial as they are publicly stating their commitment to gender equality, and have overall responsibility for the application.

Their role in SAT meetings will ensure:

- That the power balance within the SAT is maintained, that everyone is able to have their say and that stronger voices and hierarchy do not overpower discussions and decisions
- That all members of the SAT take responsibility for completing tasks and the charter mark process
- That SAT members are given proportionate responsibility

There are also logistical issues to consider:

- How many meetings will you have, when and where will they be, and for how long?
- Who will decide the agenda for SAT meetings, especially the first meeting?
- Will SAT meetings be minuted? Who will have responsibility for that? How will the secretariat of the meetings be supported?
- How will the chair communicate the work and progress of the SAT to senior management teams, committees and the rest of the institution?

Members

In addition to the chair, the team should include people from a variety of backgrounds and with different experiences, with consideration of intersectionality:

- A proportion of men and women that reflects the gender profile of the institution or department. Where the numbers of women (or men) in a department are very small, it may be that one gender is overrepresented on the SAT due to small numbers, for example: if there are only four women in a department of 25 and two of them sit on an SAT of six, the SAT would be 33% women while the department is only 16% women. It is vital that the composition of the SAT does not lead to a disproportionate burden on underrepresented groups.
- A group of academics, professional and support staff, researchers, and students at different grades and levels that is representative of the submitting unit. This should include full time and part time staff, and staff on different contract types.

The application requires extensive quantitative and qualitative data, which requires in-depth analysis and good presentation, so that it may be readily interpreted by others. You may want to include someone on your SAT who can take the lead on producing relevant data sets.

- Individuals with knowledge of, skills and experience in advancing gender equality. This may be a mix of both lived experience and that gained through research and scholarship.

- It is likely that, for an institutional application, the team will include at least one person from each of the institution's faculties, colleges or other high level academic groupings. The aim is for each of the main areas of the submitting unit to have a representative on the SAT.

To ensure effectiveness, while also maintaining adequate representation, a more complex structure might be appropriate - for example, a smaller application writing team and a larger working group. Where this is the case, in the description of the self-assessment team, for this example provide details of which staff make up the writing group and which sit on the larger working/steering group.

As with any committee or team, it can be difficult to know how the optimal number of members for effective discussions and decision making. Finding enough people to meet the requirements set out above may also be challenging and difficult to balance with size.

Large groups may provide an element of 'safety in numbers' whereby people feel more comfortable taking part and contributing, they may also ensure a good variety of opinions, backgrounds and ideas. On the other hand, it is easy for voices to be lost in big meetings, especially where people may be expressing something quite challenging or personal.

Future proofing

Think ahead and decide what happens once you have submitted your application for the charter:

- How will senior managers monitor progress against actions?
- Who will 'own' the action plan?
- How will the institution ensure that actions are owned and implemented within the submitting unit and unit structures?

A SAT can be a committee in its own right or it can operate under the umbrella of another group. If an existing committee structure will be absorbing the work of the SAT, you may want to ensure that the chair of that committee, or another representative is on the SAT so there is some continuity.

Training

While some SAT members will be involved because of their experience and knowledge of gender equality, others will be there because of their experience and knowledge in other areas. It may be useful for SAT members to undertake some initial training or facilitated discussions around gender equality so that all members feel comfortable and confident in having what are likely to be difficult conversations.

In addition to ensuring all SAT members are able to talk openly about gender and intersectionality, such discussions at the beginning of the process can help the group to clarify what it is they are trying to achieve and to define and unpack some of the high-level issues which are likely to exist. Particularly important is that the SAT is mindful of the voices of colleagues who identify as members of underrepresented groups.

SAT Activity

Meetings

The SAT must meet frequently over the course of the self-assessment processes leading up to the charter mark application. ECU recommends that the self-assessment process can take one year or longer. This timeline will also depend on the level of data already available to the submitting unit.

Shared responsibility, workload and recognition

Athena SWAN depends on assuming a collective responsibility for gender equality. It is not feasible that any one or two individuals be responsible for completing the whole application. A requirement of the charter is that a final submission be the result of group work, with collaboration across the SAT and more widely. Conducting a thorough self-assessment and completing an application requires considerable time and effort, and there should be consideration of participation on the SAT in the following:

- any workload allocation model
- recognition in appraisal
- as evidence of leadership and/or contributing to the running of the institution/department in promotion

The self-assessment process itself should not be exempt from reflection, and SATs might consider the following questions:

- Are professional and support staff regarded as 'full members' of the SAT or as administrative support?
- Could tasks such as note taking be rotated?
- Are there male and female champions?
- Are senior staff engaging in the process and sharing the workload?
- Do meetings allow for frank debate?
- Is this committee the one in the unit with the greatest representation of the underrepresented gender?
- How can the views of the underrepresented gender be incorporated into the application and action plan without them writing the application?

Staff and student consultation

Staff and student consultation is crucial to a successful application. Staff and students will have their own views on the institution's gender equality priorities, and understanding their appetite for this work can be useful for developing and communicating actions and priorities.

Your application should include detail of how the SAT has consulted, including details such as:

- What surveys were carried out and when, with response rates disaggregated by gender
- Details of other consultation exercises such as focus groups, structured or semi-structured one-to-one interviews, 'town hall' meetings, or round table discussions. This information should include who led on this activity and who participated (e.g. who facilitated focus groups, what staff groups were present, the overarching theme, and when they took place).

The type of consultation carried out may be dependent on the size of the submitting unit, and whether or not meaningful data disaggregated by gender can be provided. You should expect to carry out a range of consultation activities, and these are not limited to the list above.

Your institution should have a full communications plan surrounding your consultation process. Staff and students will need to understand the point of the consultation activity, and the Athena SWAN process in general, in order to engage fully. Ensuring individuals feel secure in responding to and understanding the benefits of consultation, and trust the SAT to utilise the results appropriately will be important to maximising your response rates and the quality of captured data.

The timing of the consultation exercises is an important consideration and submitting units are advised to think carefully about when to conduct consultation achieve the best possible response. For example, staff and students receive a lot of surveys, and survey fatigue can reduce response rates. If the Athena SWAN survey were to be conducted shortly after another, similar survey the SAT could consider combining them.

Using staff consultation results in your application

You are not expected to provide the full dataset from your surveys or other types of consultations in the application, but instead make reference to the findings in the relevant parts of the application form. Staff consultation data – both quantitative and qualitative – provide valuable context for, and understanding of, the information asked for throughout the application. Staff and student consultation can also provide the rationales for specific and proactive actions in the action plan. Without consultation conducted as part of the initial self-assessment process, an application will be unsuccessful. Although further data collection,

research, and analysis are expected in the future – an action plan should not rely heavily on further self-assessment.

What to include in your application?

Considering the guidance provided above, the following information should be included in your Athena SWAN application:

| Member | Job | SAT role | Experience |
|-------------|--|---|--|
| Jane Greene | Senior Lecturer (employed since 2005) | - Survey analysis - Focus group lead | - Promoted (2010) - Works part-time (0.7 FTE) |

Identify the members of the self-assessment team, including their roles both within the institution and as part of the self-assessment process. This description should be displayed as a table, and up to 20 words (in addition to name and job title) are not included in the word count.

Detail how participation on a SAT is factored into any workload allocation model, recognised in appraisal, considered as evidence of leadership and/or contributing to the running of the institution/department in promotion.

Provide an account of the self-assessment process including a record of activity, with details of:

- when the team was established
- how and why members were selected
- how often the team has met
- what the focus of each meeting has been

Detail how the team has consulted with members of the institution and students, including details of what surveys were carried out and when, with the response rate disaggregated by gender, and any other consultation exercises such as focus groups, structured or semi-structured one-to-one interviews. As mentioned, the type of consultation carried out may be dependent on the size of the submitting unit, and whether or not meaningful data disaggregated by gender can be provided. Make clear your rationale for the types of methods used.

Provide information on what consultation has occurred with staff or individuals outside of the institution, such as use of a 'critical friend' to read a draft application, presentations from Athena SWAN award holders, etc. External consultation is recommended, so that further expertise can be utilised, and because external individuals are abler to identify where your explanations (for example, of practices) are unclear to people not based within your institution.

Explain what the internal and external reporting mechanisms of the team are currently and what they will be in the future.

Provide plans for the future of the SAT, after the application is submitted, including:

- how often the team will continue to meet
- how the SAT intends to monitor implementation of the action plan
- how the SAT intends to interact with staff and students
- whether the membership of the group will change through rotation or expansion

Glossary

Intersectionality

People's identities are shaped by several factors at the same time, creating unique experiences and perspectives. These factors include among others race, ethnicity, age, disability, gender identity, religion and belief, and sexuality.

Submitting unit

A unit eligible to make an application to Athena SWAN. This includes institution of higher education and research such as universities, institutes of technology based in the Republic of Ireland, and research institutes based in the UK. It also includes departments. We use the term department to apply to a range of units that sit below institution-level awards. There are precedents for a wide range of successful submissions from very small departments to large faculties.