

Equality and diversity efforts are not a 'burden'

Plans to reduce 'unnecessary bureaucracy' in UK universities could be divisive and must be challenged.

The UK government quietly dropped a bombshell last month. It said that universities need no longer comply with some voluntary membership schemes to get grant funding. Such schemes include those designed to promote and protect equality and diversity, such as an internationally recognized gender-equality charter called Athena SWAN. The move is part of a broader retreat from what the government sees as “unnecessary bureaucracy” in research and teaching.

Universities apply for an Athena SWAN charter – and a separate Race Equality Charter – to improve their record in equality and diversity. Institutions are rated according to three levels of achievement: bronze, silver and gold. Athena SWAN was established in the United Kingdom in 2005, and has since been adopted by institutions in some other countries, including Canada and Ireland, and has inspired a similar scheme in the United States.

In addition to discouraging universities from taking part, the UK government told the country's two largest public research funders to “place no weight” on such charters in the course of their funding and regulatory activities.

One of the funders, the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR), has said that applicants will need to “demonstrate their commitment to tackling disadvantage and discrimination”. But it will no longer make holding an Athena SWAN silver award a requirement for receiving infrastructure grants such as those for its flagship biomedical research centres, to which the NIHR has committed £816 million (US\$1 billion) for the 5 years to 2022. The introduction of this criterion in 2011 is credited with the high uptake of the Athena SWAN scheme in the field of medical research.

Any UK researchers tempted to welcome these changes must stop and think about the implications. Equality is a right. It is enshrined in law. Universities are continually falling short on achieving equality, as well as on measures of diversity and inclusion. And, although schemes such as Athena SWAN and the Race Equality Charter need improvement, their ambitions must never be regarded as a burden.

Most of the United Kingdom's research and university leaders understand this. They also know that it is unlikely that this government will change its mind. And they will be aware that Advance HE, the London-based non-profit organization that runs both equality charters, now faces an existential crisis. It is funded through university

subscriptions, and universities must resist the temptation to let these lapse in response to signals from the government that the organization's work is not important.

More than 160 institutions and nearly 800 departments currently submit to the Athena SWAN assessment process. But most of these departments and institutions have got only as far as the bronze stage – meaning that they have assessed their equalities policies and have a plan to improve. Just 20 universities have achieved silver, in which previously identified challenges have been successfully addressed, and only one institution – the John Innes Centre in Norwich, UK – has been awarded gold, with Athena SWAN completely embedded across the institution. This is undoubtedly slow progress towards equality.

Reform rather than reject

There is dissatisfaction, too, from the perspective of participating academics. An independent review of Athena SWAN in the United Kingdom, published in 2020, found that researchers were unhappy with the process of awarding decisions (see go.nature.com/3ktrw5). At universities, female staff carry more of the administrative load when it comes to submitting applications, work that carries little or no compensation and comes with the pressure of responsibility if an institution fails to achieve its target grade.

The review recommends more transparency and consistency in the criteria for awarding bronze, silver and gold, and a requirement for gender balance in assessment panels, which must also include researchers with appropriate expertise. Furthermore, the review highlights that the charter's current approach to gender equality doesn't adequately take into account the additional hurdles faced by female researchers who are Black or from other minority and under-represented groups.

However, studies are starting to show that Athena SWAN has had a positive impact in some areas – such as the representation of women among professors and in senior leadership roles. Advance HE must commit to implementing all of the review's recommendations. It needs to overhaul how assessments are carried out, make the awarding criteria more robust, and introduce a system – similar to that seen in journal peer review – through which applicants can revise and resubmit applications, rather than the current ‘pass-fail’ approach, which can be disheartening to staff members and institutions who want to do better. Advance HE must also consider how to harmonize some of the requirements for Athena SWAN and the Race Equality Charter.

The UK government's move is unwise, and risks being divisive. Along with setting back hard-won, if incomplete, progress on equality and diversity, it risks fuelling tensions between overworked and over-assessed researchers – who might welcome a reduction in administrative work – and those, often from minority communities, whose experience of universities is often less than positive. This would be an unnecessary conflict, because all researchers can benefit from more welcoming and inclusive spaces.

Universities are just starting down the road towards improving diversity and equality. This is a journey that cannot be abandoned.

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