

# Equality and diversity in the Irish higher education institutes

Case study for KOTAMO-project

### **Knowledge for a better society**

Oxford Research provide knowledge for a better society by combining our competencies in research, strategy and communication.

We carry out analysis and evaluations a cross a number of thematic fields including industry- and regional development, welfare policies, labour market and education issues, as well as research- and innovation systems.

We also facilitate implementation- and change processes based on the outcome of our analysis and evaluations.

Oxford Research was established in 1995 and is part of Oxford Group. We have offices in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Latvia, and in Belgium (Brussels).

### **Oxford Research AB**

Norrandsgatan 11

111 43 Stockholm

Sweden

(+46) 8 24 07 00

office@oxfordresearch.se

www.oxfordresearch.se

### **Client**

The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture

### **Project period**

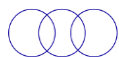
07/2021–09/2022

### **Team**

[Employee name]

[Employee name]

[Employee name]



**The venn-diagram** is a stylistic representation of Oxford Research efforts to competences combine in research, strategy and communication, in providing knowledge for a better society.

# Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1 The HEI structure in Ireland .....	3
1.2 Gender equality in higher education in Ireland .....	3
1.3 Equality in higher education in Ireland .....	4
1.4 Cases .....	5
1.5 Athena Swan .....	5
1.6 Science Foundation Ireland .....	8
<b>Sources: .....</b>	<b>11</b>
Interviews: .....	13

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The HEI structure in Ireland

Irish universities are state-funded and generally operated autonomously. There are 22 third level institutions, including eight universities, in Ireland.<sup>1</sup> Higher education is provided mainly by universities, Institutes of Technology, technological universities and specialist colleges. The Department (Ministry) of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science<sup>2</sup> is responsible for higher education and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) responds to the Ministry<sup>3</sup>.

## 1.2 Gender equality in higher education in Ireland

During the past decade, Ireland has taken several measures to promote equality in higher education. In 2016, a large-scale study of gender equality in higher education institutes, including policy recommendations was carried out by a group of experts.<sup>4</sup> In 2019, the Centre for Excellence in Gender Equality was established in order to provide centralised support for HEIs in their work towards gender equality.<sup>5</sup> The Senior Academic Leadership (SALI) was launched in 2019 by the Ministry for Higher Education. The initiative provides funding for 45 gender-specific senior leadership in order to attract outstanding female applicants to apply for senior academic positions in the higher education institutes of Ireland.<sup>6</sup>

When it comes to gender equality in higher education, the situation in other Member States in the European Union is comparable to the one in Ireland. Generally, women hold much lower percentage of the professorial positions all over EU. Statistics on EU-countries shows that even in academic fields where women represented more than half of Bachelor's and Master's students and graduates and held almost half of the academic positions lower down in academic organizations, their representation decreased higher up in the academic structure, with the lowest numbers (26.2%) in professorial positions.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://hea.ie/higher-education-institutions/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/departments-of-higher-education-innovation-and-science/>

<sup>3</sup> International Education Specialist (n.d.)

<sup>4</sup> Report of the Expert Group (2016) HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Education Institutions, <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/HEA-National-Review-of-Gender-Equality-in-Irish-Higher-Education-Institutions.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> HEA (n.d) Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality, <https://hea.ie/policy/gender/gender-equality-centre-for-excellence/>

<sup>6</sup> IUA (n.d) Senior Academic Leadership Initiative, <https://www.iua.ie/ourwork/diversity-equality/senior-academic-leadership-initiative/>.

<sup>7</sup> She Figures (2021)

Since 2016, the HEA collects gender disaggregated data from Irish higher education institutions that receive annual core-grant funding from the HEA.

Since 2019<sup>8</sup>, one female academic has been appointed president (rector) within the universities. There are six male presidents. Within the core-funded academic staff 54% were men and 46% women. The situation among specialists and researchers were the same, 54% men and 46% women. Among the professional, management and support staff who were core-funded, 65% were women and 35% men. Meanwhile, 46% of the researchers and specialists were women and 54% men. Among Specialist Professional, Management and Support Staff 64% were women and 54% men<sup>9</sup>.

The percentage of men (57%) who worked full time with a permanent contract was higher than of women (43%). Therefore, the percentage of women who worked full time had temporary contracts (55 %) was 10 % higher than men with temporary contracts (45%)<sup>10</sup>.

### 1.3 Equality in higher education in Ireland

Although the HEA has previously announced that it would be compulsory for third-level institutions to provide annual breakdown of ethnic diversity among academic personnel, starting from December 2020<sup>11</sup>, we were, however not able to find any annual breakdown of ethnic diversity in HEI.

The available data indicates that the representation of people with different ethnicities in the Irish academia is low: a study by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and the ESRI<sup>12</sup> found that the black people with immigrant background are less than half as likely to be employed as white Irish people<sup>13</sup>.

In 2021 the HEA made a survey<sup>14</sup> regarding race equality in higher education institutions. 3,323 staff in higher education institutions responded to the survey. According to the results, most respondents employed within professional, managerial and support services were white Irish (83%) or white other (12%). Respondents from minority ethnic groups were four times more likely to be employed in academic roles than in research centre or research fellow roles. Only 48% of respondents from minority ethnic groups had full-time permanent contracts, compared to 60% of white other and 71% of white Irish. They also

<sup>8</sup> This data does not include the Royal College of Surgeons since it was not categorized as a university at the time.

<sup>9</sup> Higher Education Authority (2021)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Thejournal.ie (2020). ["Irish universities will have to provide breakdown of ethnic diversity among staff each year from December"](#).

<sup>12</sup> Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission; Economic & Social Research Institute (2018). [Ethnicity and Nationality in the Irish Labour Market](#).

<sup>13</sup> British Council & the Royal Irish Academy (2020)

<sup>14</sup> Higher Education Authority (2021). [Race Equality in the Higher Education Sector](#).

were more likely to have hourly contracts (6%) as compared to white Irish (2%) and white other (3%).

## 1.4 Cases

This section introduces the reader to two measures implemented to increase gender equality and diversity in Irish academia: Athena Swan and Science Foundation Ireland (SFI).

## 1.5 Athena Swan

**Background:** Athena Swan Charter is an accreditation scheme initiated in the UK in 2005 that seeks to recognise higher education institutes' commitment and progress on equality and diversity.

Athena SWAN Charter was introduced in Ireland 2015. The process of introducing the programme in Ireland was a bottom-up process in the sense that the Women in Science and Engineering Research Centre (WiSAR) at Trinity College identified the need for the Athena SWAN Charter in Ireland. The Charter had previously been used in the UK. It could easily be adapted in Ireland because of the similarities between the educational systems in the UK and Ireland. Today, all of Ireland's universities and institutes of technology and several colleges participate in Athena Swan Ireland.

**Objectives:** when the Charter was launched, the overall aim was to increase the number of women among the academic staff in Irish higher education institutes and specifically the number of female professors within the STEMM (science, technology, engineering, , mathematics and medicine) disciplines. The Charter has since been extended to include arts, humanities, social sciences, business, and law and also staff with professional, managerial and administrative roles.<sup>15</sup>As of 2016, the Charter no longer focuses merely on gender equality between men and women but the experiences of personnel with trans-background and representatives of different ethnic groups as well as underrepresentation of men in particular disciplines are now more widely considered, making the approach more intersectional.<sup>16</sup>

Another reason for introduction of the Athena SWAN programme in Ireland was to create a more supportive environment for female researchers in the higher education institutions (e.g., improved support on return from maternity leave, flexible working hours).<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Higher Education Authority (n.d.) Athena Swan, <https://hea.ie/policy/gender/athena-swan/>.

<sup>16</sup> Higher Education Authority (2019). [HEA Statement on Athena SWAN Charter in Ireland](#).

<sup>17</sup> Interview with the Representative of Research, Innovation & Engagement at the Technological HEA (2021).

### 1.5.1 Target group

The primary target group is the teaching staff, as well as the leadership of the higher education institutes (e.g. rectors and vice rectors).<sup>18</sup> However, as of 2016 even administrative personnel of higher education institutes is included.

### 1.5.2 Actors involved

The Athena SWAN Charter is a national initiative and is funded by the state. Funding comes through the HEA which is located under the Ministry for Further and Higher Education.<sup>19</sup>

National Committee supports the development of the Athena SWAN charter. The committee consist of representatives from higher education institutions, Advance HE, and the HEA. Irish research agencies, the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) are also represented.<sup>20</sup>

### 1.5.3 Measures included

The charter consists of three different awards: Bronze, Silver and Gold. When institutions (or departments) apply for the Athena SWAN Charter, they commit to systematically assessing and advancing gender equality and making an action plan.

Applications are peer reviewed by a panel of academics, subject experts, human resources, and equality and diversity practitioners from other member institutions who then make recommendations on the level of awards.

A Bronze award requires an assessment of gender equality and the related challenges as well as a 4-year action plan to address these challenges. A Silver award recognises the successful implementation of the proposed action plan and its measurable impact. A Gold award recognises beacons of achievement in gender equality and champions in promoting good practice in the wider community.

A Bronze Institutional award expires after three years. To ensure that an HEI is improving, the Bronze renewal application requires demonstration of ‘progress’ on the original targets or actions identified. Once an initial Institutional Bronze Award has been achieved, institutions must renew this Institutional Bronze Award once to apply for an Institutional Silver Award. The majority of departments must also hold a Bronze award,

---

<sup>18</sup> Interview with the Representative of Research, Innovation & Engagement at the Technological HEA (2021).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Higher Education Authority (n.d.). “[Athena SWAN Charter](#)”.

and at least one department must hold a Silver award to be able to apply for a Institutional Silver Award.<sup>21</sup>

If an award holder is unsuccessful in renewing their award, they are offered a grace period. Applicants can submit a revised application at any time during this period and their award remains valid throughout the grace period and assessment of the revised application. Only one grace period is offered per award and if the applicant submits a revised application and is again unsuccessful, their award may be removed or lowered. If an extension has previously been made to the award validity for another reason, the grace period following an unsuccessful renewal may be shortened or unavailable.<sup>22</sup>

#### 1.5.4 Results and impact

Albeit there is no direct connection to Athena Swan, it is worth mentioning that in the recent years Ireland has had three female presidents within Ireland's seven research intensive universities. However, this shows that the institutions are slowly changing their culture into a better working environment for everybody. There is also a recognition of the need for cultural and structural change at higher education institutions when it comes to differences (e.g., disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation).<sup>23</sup>

According to the interviewee, the number of women in top level position in the STEM disciplines have gone up since Athena SWAN was launched, before the programme the numbers were under 20% and in 2021 the numbers were at around 20%. According to the interviewee, it is likely that the Charter has had great impact.<sup>24</sup>

#### 1.5.5 Lessons learned

**Success factors:** One of the things that made Athena SWAN successful was that three of Ireland's main research funding agencies announced that they would require the applicant institutions to have an Athena SWAN award in order to apply for funding. This significantly increases the incentive for higher education institutions and other research institutions to apply.<sup>25</sup>

**Challenges:** the first challenge with the Athena SWAN was the lack of gender breakdowns of staff data. There was a lot of work to be done with tailoring the Athena SWAN application forms from the UK to make them more applicable to the Irish system,

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with the Representative of Research, Innovation & Engagement at the Technological HEA (2021).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



even though the systems are quite similar. The Irish HEA has only started gathering gender breakdown staff data in recent years.<sup>26</sup>

The second challenge was that when the Athena SWAN panel started to review the Irish applications, no one in Ireland was familiar with the process. Hence, everyone in the panel was from the UK and had little knowledge about the Irish system. It took time to train people from Ireland to be peer-reviewers. Today all applications are reviewed by people from Ireland and the application system is adjusted to the Irish context.<sup>27</sup>

## 1.6 Science Foundation Ireland

**Background:** Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) was established in 2000 with the aim to ensure the future development of biotechnology, information, and communication technology as well as sustainable energy and energy-efficient technologies. SFI funds both oriented basic research<sup>28</sup> and applied research in the areas of technology, engineering and mathematics. SFI is the largest funder of competitive research in Ireland.<sup>29</sup>

SFI offers awards to researchers at different career stages. The Starting Investigator Grant (SIRG) is considered an early career award and is open to applicants who are between three- and eight-year post-PhD without an academic position. The Career Development Award (CDA) is a mid-career award open to applicants with three- and fifteen-years of experience post-PhD who have an academic position. The SFI Investigators Programme (IvP) is considered an established career stage award, where applicants must be at least five years post-PhD and have at least ten senior author publications.<sup>30</sup>

SFI has an active role in promoting gender balance in higher education institutions in Ireland, especially in the STEM disciplines. SFI aims at removing and mitigating any existing or perceived factors that may limit the participation of women in STEM careers, and redress the gender imbalance amongst SFI award holders (of which 26% are currently female)<sup>31</sup>.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Basic research is here defined as research carried out with the expectation that it will produce a broad base of knowledge likely to form the background to the solution of recognised/ expected/current/future problems or possibilities.

<sup>29</sup> Science Foundation Ireland [website](#) (n.d.).

<sup>30</sup> Fritch, McIntosh, Stokes & Boland (2019). [Practitioners' perspectives: a funder's experience of addressing gender balance in its portfolio of awards.](#)

<sup>31</sup> Science Foundation Ireland website (n.d.).

### 1.6.1 Target group

SFI's specific KPI is to increase the number of women in the portfolio of the fund. Hence, the intended target group is SFI's potential applicant pool, that is all researchers in Ireland who are working in the STEM disciplines.<sup>32</sup>

### 1.6.2 Actors involved

SFI is funded by the state. It is located under the Department of Further and Higher Education.<sup>33</sup>

The SFI Board is responsible for setting the broad strategy and policies of SFI. The Board delegates to the management and sub-committees the responsibility for the implementation of these policies. Board Members are appointed by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.<sup>34</sup>

SFI's Executive Committee is chaired by the Director General and is made up of the senior management team. The Executive Committee assists the Director General in carrying out responsibilities in managing and controlling the administration and business of SFI.<sup>35</sup>

### 1.6.3 Measures included

SFI has implemented a range of gender initiatives and is leading on several international projects focusing on improving gender equality. Described below are some examples of the measures provided by SFI:

- In 2015, SFI introduced a gender initiative into the SFI Starting Investigator Research Grant Programme (SIRG) since the share of female applicants (25%) was significantly lower than the percentage of females among the potential applicants, STEM academic contract research staff (39%).

Before 2015, institutions could nominate only five candidates for SIRG and gender was not specified. The gender initiative changed this – institutions were allowed to nominate 12 candidates with a maximum of six male candidates. The applications were treated equally.

---

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Representative of the Scientific Programme, SFI (2021).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> Science Foundation Ireland website, <https://www.sfi.ie/>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

As a result of this change, the number of female applicants rose from 25% in 2013 to 50% in 2015. In 2018, 48% of the applicants were female and 41% of researchers received funding were female. Fritch, McIntosh, Stokes and Boland write that the initiative was successful in creating a stronger incentive for institutions to seek out excellent female researchers.<sup>36</sup>

- In 2016 SFI launched the SFI Gender Strategy<sup>37</sup> which provided a comprehensive framework to streamline gender initiatives across all SFI's funding programmes, with the aim of improving gender balance among its award holders. Originally SFI set a target of 25% female award holders. This target was revised upwards to 30% in 2017 after the original target was reached. As a result, there has been an increase in female award holders in SFI's portfolio of awards from 21% in 2015, to 29% in 2019.<sup>38</sup>
- In 2019, SFI introduced a range of gender initiatives in the SFI Frontiers for the Future Programme to increase the number of women awardees. Gender initiatives included widening the eligibility criteria (lower number of senior author publications, removal of the requirement to hold an independent research grant) to allow for a more diverse applicant pool, having a language expert review the call to ensure the language was inclusive and, in the event of applicants receiving the same final score, priority was given to applications from female candidates. After these gender initiatives were implemented, the percentage of women funded increased from 21%, in previous equivalent programme calls, to 45% in 2019.<sup>39</sup>
- In 2019 SFI introduced paid maternity leave for postgraduate students funded on SFI awards.<sup>40</sup>
- SFI aims at ensuring that its work on gender equality is transparent. Therefore, SFI publishes its gender data which is available for everyone.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Fritch, McIntosh, Stokes & Boland (2019). Practitioners' perspectives: a funder's experience of addressing gender balance in its portfolio of awards, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03080188.2019.1603882>

<sup>37</sup> SFI (2016) Gender strategy 2016–2020, <https://www.sfi.ie/research-news/publications/SFI-Gender-Strategy-2016-2020.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> Fritch; Boland (2019). *Improving gender equality, diversity and inclusion in Science Foundation Ireland*:

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

## 1.6.4 Results and impact

**Results:** As it has been described above, the individual measures implemented by SFI has been successful in increasing female award holders and the number of women funded by SFI. The long-term effects have been the increased number of women in the SFI's portfolio, and the number of women funded by the SFI's teams.

In 2016, 34% of the academic staff in HEIs were women, in 2021 the percentage is 37%. The target to increase the number of female award holders in STEM to 25% was achieved in 2016 and a new target was set to increase the number to 30% by 2020, which almost have been achieved.<sup>42</sup>

According to the representative, the SFI's measures have had a great impact on the cultural changes within Irish HEIs. The interviewee further argues that SFI has played an important role when it comes to requirements for a gender equality plan, providing gender equality data and committees looking at gender equality at all levels of the institution.<sup>43</sup>

## 1.6.5 Lessons learnt

**Success factors:** all of the funders and the higher education institutions have been brought together through the work with the Gender Strategy to work on making sure the SFI's policies and practices are in line. SFI, together with the funding agencies and HEA have started a community of practice to ensure that they are working together and are designing their policies together and share their experiences and knowledge between the agencies.<sup>44</sup>

## Sources:

British Council & Royal Irish Academia (2020). *Race, Ethnicity and Change in Higher Education*. Available at:

[https://www.britishcouncil.ie/sites/default/files/race\\_ethnicity\\_and\\_change\\_in\\_higher\\_education\\_web.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.ie/sites/default/files/race_ethnicity_and_change_in_higher_education_web.pdf)

Fritch, Rochelle; McIntosh, Allison; Stokes, Nikola & Marion Boland (2019).

“Practitioner’s perspectives: a funders experience of addressing gender balance in its portfolio of awards”. *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 44(2):192-203. Available at:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03080188.2019.1603882>

---

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Representative of the Scientific Programme, SFI (2021).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

Fritch, Rochelle; Boland, Marion (2021). *Improving equality, diversity and inclusion in Science Foundation Ireland*. Av

Gender Equality Taskforce (2018). Gender Action Plan 2018-2020: Accelerating Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions. Available at:  
<https://assets.gov.ie/24481/8ab03e5efb59451696caf1dbebe6fddc.pdf>

Higher Education Authority (2021a). *Higher Education Institutional Staff Profiles by Gender*. Available at: <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/07/Higher-Education-Institutional-Staff-Profiles-by-Gender-2021.pdf>

Higher Education Authority (2021b). *Race Equality in the Higher Education Institutions*. Available at: <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2021/10/HEA-Race-Equality-in-the-Higher-Education-Sector-Analysis-commissioned-by-the-Higher-Education-Authority-1.pdf>

Higher Education Authority (2019). *HEA Statement on Athena SWAN Charter in Ireland*. Available at: <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/07/HEA-Statement-on-Athena-SWAN-Charter-in-Ireland-.pdf>

Higher Education Authority (2018). *Higher Education Institutional Staff Profiles by Gender*. <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/01/Higher-Education-Institutional-Staff-Profiles-by-Gender-2018.pdf>

Higher Education Authority (2016). *HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions*. Available at: <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/HEA-National-Review-of-Gender-Equality-in-Irish-Higher-Education-Institutions.pdf>

Higher Education Authority (n.d). "Athena SWAN Charter." Available at:  
<https://hea.ie/policy/gender/athena-swan/>

International Education Specialists (n.d). "Study in Ireland". Available at:  
<https://www.idp.com/global/study-in-ireland/>

Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission & Economic and Social Research Institute (2018). *Ethnicity and Nationality in the Irish Labour Market*. Available at:  
[https://www.esri.ie/system/files/media/file-uploads/2018-12/BKMNEXT369\\_0.pdf](https://www.esri.ie/system/files/media/file-uploads/2018-12/BKMNEXT369_0.pdf)

Science Foundation Ireland (2016). *Gender Strategy 2016-2020*. Available at:  
<https://www.sfi.ie/resources/SFI-Gender-Strategy-2016-2020.pdf>

Science Foundation Ireland (n.d). Available at: <https://www.sfi.ie/>

She Figures (2020). *Gender in research and innovation: statistics and indicators*.

Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/web/eu-law-and-publications/publication-detail/-/publication/67d5a207-4da1-11ec-91ac-01aa75ed71a1>

## **Interviews:**

Interview with Representative of the Scientific Programme, the Science Foundation Ireland, 17 Dec 2021.

Interview with Representative of Research, Innovation & Engagement, the Technological Higher Education Association, 16 Dec 2021.

# OXFORD RESEARCH

## **Denmark**

Oxford Research A/S  
Vesterbrogade 149, Bld. 12  
3<sup>rd</sup> floor, 1620 Copenhagen V  
[office@oxfordresearch.dk](mailto:office@oxfordresearch.dk)

## **Norway**

Oxford Research AS  
Østre Strandgate 12  
4610 Kristiansand  
[post@oxford.no](mailto:post@oxford.no)

## **Sweden**

Oxford Research AB  
Norrandsgatan 11  
111 43 Stockholm  
[office@oxfordresearch.se](mailto:office@oxfordresearch.se)

## **Finland**

Oxford Research Oy  
Eteläinen Hesperiankatu 18  
LH 2, 00100 Helsinki  
[office@oxfordresearch.fi](mailto:office@oxfordresearch.fi)

## **Baltics/Riga**

Oxford Research Baltics SIA  
Kr.Valdemara 23-37, k.2  
LV-1010, Riga  
[info@oxfordresearch.lv](mailto:info@oxfordresearch.lv)

## **Belgium/Brussels**

Oxford Research c/o ENSR  
5. Rue Archimède  
Box 4, 1000 Brussels  
[office@oxfordresearch.eu](mailto:office@oxfordresearch.eu)