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Title	Developing a theoretical framework for exploring the institutional responses to the Athena SWAN Charter in higher education institutions - a feminist institutionalist perspective
Authors	O'Mullane, Monica
Publication date	2021
Original Citation	O'Mullane, M. (2021) 'Developing a theoretical framework for exploring the institutional responses to the Athena SWAN Charter in higher education institutions - a feminist institutionalist perspective', Irish Journal of Sociology, 29(2), pp. 215–235. doi:10.1177/0791603521995372
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.1177/0791603521995372
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IJS

Irish Journal of Sociology
2021, Vol. 29(2) 215–235
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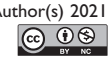
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Developing a theoretical framework for exploring the institutional responses to the Athena SWAN Charter in higher education institutions—A feminist institutionalist perspective

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Abstract

Why does the institutional response of higher education institutions to a 'potentially institutionally transformative' gender equality programme such as the Athena SWAN (AS) Charter matter? If a higher education institution seeks and attains the AS award, then the institutional response would be to embed the Charter's action plans thoroughly without resistance or variation across higher education institutional contexts? These are the initial and broader reflective questions underpinning and inspiring this article. The reality is that the Athena SWAN Charter actions and commitments are not simply installed into the technical rules and procedures of higher education institutions, resulting in the organisational and cultural change it seeks. It is argued in this article that applying a feminist institutionalist lens, which deals with the exchange between formal and informal rules, norms and practices, and the roles played by actors working with the rules – the micro-foundations of gendered institutions – will inform our

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understanding of how a change programme such as Athena SWAN can instil institutional change- if any change. This article details a theoretical framework, drawing from the FI perspective, which will be applied to an empirical study exploring the institutional responses of higher education institutions to the Athena SWAN process in Ireland.

Keywords
Higher education, Athena SWAN, feminist Institutionalism, gender equality

Introduction

The Athena SWAN Charter is an equality charter for universities and colleges (higher education institutions – HEIs), coordinated and managed by Advance HE in the UK (since 2005), and by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland (since 2015). The Charter acknowledges and encourages commitment to advancing the careers of women in research and science. It has been extended (since 2015) to include disciplines from the humanities, social sciences, business and law, in professional and support roles, and for transgender staff and students. It is now recognised as an institutional pathway for addressing cultural and structural inequalities, and also more recently for paving the way to tackle the intersectionality of inequalities. It opens up conversations and social spaces for people to challenge gender inequalities in their workplaces (Caffrey et al., 2016, Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019).

This article describes a theoretical framework that will structure an empirical study of the HEI institutional responses to the Athena SWAN Charter in Ireland. It is argued in this article that applying a feminist institutionalist (FI) lens, which deals with the exchange between formal and informal rules, norms and practices, and the roles played by actors working with the rules – the micro-foundations of gendered institutions (Lowndes, 2020; Mackay and Murtagh, 2019) – will strengthen our understanding of how a change programme such as Athena SWAN can instil institutional change (and if so, to what extent) to the rules, processes and norms of an HEI. Generally when the term 'institution' is used in this article, it is with reference to the entity as an organisation (Scott, 2008), unless stated otherwise.

HEIs – An indisputable setting of gender inequality

In her work on inequality regimes (an analytical approach developed for exploring the barriers that create inequality in work organisations), Acker (2006) points out that much societal inequality originates and is reproduced in political and social

institutions. Therefore it is unsurprising that while women are represented in the Irish higher education workforce overall, there is noticeable dearth of women in senior positions, particularly in academic posts, and in decision-making roles. As O'Connor highlights, based on HEA data, 51 per cent of lecturers in Irish universities are women, with 24 per cent occupying full professorial level and have a three times lesser chance than men in attaining a professorship (HEA, 2018b; O'Connor, 2019a). Clearly a programme that seeks to embed sustainable change, such as Athena SWAN, is needed to tackle this lack of gender parity. Irish figures correspond broadly with EU data averages, which are that 41 per cent of women occupy all academic grades, and 24 per cent have attained full professorships (European Commission, 2019). Barriers to equality are mostly rooted in the structure and culture of Irish universities (Linehan et al., 2009, O Grada et al., 2015). Such barriers include career pipeline issues (recruitment, promotion and retention of staff), work–life balance practices, all types of career leave, bullying and harassment issues and informal arrangements, for example meeting times – having them at a time of the working day to suit people with caring/family duties, or not. The experience of women's underrepresentation in senior positions and decision-making roles is a universal phenomenon in HEIs beyond the Irish context (Benschop and van den Brink, 2014; Van Den Brink and Stobbe, 2009; Zippel and Ferree, 2019). The academic environment within HEIs in Ireland is experienced as 'highly patriarchal and hetero-normative' (Courtois and O'Keefe, 2015: 56). There has been an increasing expectation in higher education for academics to fulfil a '24/7 work life' which creates 'a culture of carelessness . . . that is highly gendered', in Ireland (Lynch et al., 2012: 99), as in other country contexts (Askins and Blazek, 2017). Underrepresentation of women in senior positions continues despite an increase in women academic staff and despite the fact that women are generally high academic achievers (O'Connor, 2019b).

In terms of those leading universities in Ireland, there has yet to be a female president elected (not including individuals instated as interim Presidents). This is undoubtedly the 'most damning information' regarding the gender profile of the Irish higher education workforce and in particular regarding those in senior management leading and steering positions (Quinlivan, 2017: 72). Indeed, 'no woman has ever been appointed to the top job in an Irish university in 425 years' (Quinlivan, 2017). This is a dismal situation, even compared to the international picture, where the majority of heads of HEIs are men. The EU average of women leading HEIs is 22 per cent; the Irish figure is 17 per cent, although in reality this figure relates to institutes of technologies (IoTs), not universities (European Commission, 2019). Gender inequality in the highest echelon of power is worse in the universities in Ireland, as well as across the EU (O'Connor, 2014). Leathwood and Read (2009) suggest that this is in keeping with the perception or belief that universities have a higher societal status, and this perceived status is linked to a tendency for men to occupy positions of power and prestige. Universities also (overall) make up the oldest, most prestigious and most

autonomous settings for higher education in Ireland (O'Connor, 2014). The seven public universities in Ireland 'make up a bounded, relatively undifferentiated system. . .the small size and relatively low level of differentiation among the total pool enables them to be analysed to a far greater extent than might be possible in a more structurally differentiated system' (O'Connor, 2014: 40).

In 2016, the HEA released a gender equality review of Irish higher education. It concluded that a major and comprehensive 'organisational and cultural shift' needed to happen in order to address gender inequalities in the sector (HEA, 2016: 11). Those who conceived the report seemed not to have expected the extent of systemic gender inequalities in the sector, since it resulted in them 'developing recommendations which they themselves would not have believed necessary at the beginning of the process' (HEA, 2016). Recommendations for HEIs included the need to ensure leadership on the gender equality agenda, increased transparency and gender parity in governance and management, gender equality in organisational culture (regarding behaviours, attitudes and norms of HEI staff at all levels and posts), recruitment and promotion practices, the need for developing gender action plans and Athena SWAN awards. The Expert Group expected all HEIs apply for the Bronze institutional AS award as a minimum by 2019 – an unrealistic goal which was not reached. It is clear that the 'purpose of the recommendations is to be disruptive of the status quo to force the pace of change' (Quinlivan, 2017: 72). The HEA report of the Expert Group (commissioned in the aftermath of the Sheehy Skeffington case V NUIG (Boland, 2014)), called for radical action, without which it was doubtful that HEIs would 'ever be free of gender inequality' (HEA, 2016: 11). Two further HEA reports have progressed the pace of change, encouraging HEIs to address systemic gender inequalities (in their staff profile report (HEA, 2018b) and gender action plan report (HEA, 2018a)). Athena SWAN has been continually advocated and prioritised by the HEA as an important driver for institutionally addressing such inequalities in the Irish higher education sector.

Is there a nugget of truth in what Lovenduski (2014: 16) says when reflecting on gender inequities within political institutions, asserting broadly that 'female marginalisation is hardwired into the traditional institutions' of our society? When March and Olsen (1989) stated that history is encoded within institutions, does this mean that HEIs are tied indefinitely to their historical legacy of inequality or can progress be made? Could gender inequalities be addressed in a sustainable and meaningful way by embedding a gender equality programme, such as the Athena SWAN Charter, in Ireland? The answers to these inquiries and reflections are addressed in this article. The following section outlines in greater detail the Athena SWAN Charter which provides an analytical lens for exploring if sustainable change can be embedded within an HEI through the implementation of a gender equality programme. This sets the scene for applying a FI theoretical perspective in the empirical study, which seeks to explore the HEI institutional responses to the Athena SWAN Charter.

The Athena SWAN Charter

The Athena SWAN Charter evolved from the Athena Project, a diversity programme for STEMM disciplines that aimed to promote and advance the careers of women in these disciplines, where there exists an underrepresentation, and a significant imbalance at the senior management levels. *SWAN* stands for 'Scientific Women's Academia Network', which came from the Athena project group that proposed the charter initially (Pearce, 2017). The Athena SWAN Charter was established and launched in 2005 in the UK, with the first awards distributed in 2006. In the UK there are currently 962 awards held, 164 held by HEIs and 798 by departments (Advance HE, 2020b). The Athena SWAN programme is based on the fundamental idea that gender diversity leads to better research and science (Nielsen et al., 2017). Research has shown that the participation of women in research and innovation will be unsuccessful without the restructuring of institutions and incorporating gender analysis into research (Schiebinger and Schraudner, 2011). This reflects the goal of Athena SWAN, which is to embed structural and cultural institutional change in order to improve gender parity throughout HEI staff appointments and positions, based on gender analysis data. From 2015 until the present, the programme has been adopted in Ireland, keeping the name Athena SWAN, and in Australia under the acronym SAGE (Science in Australia Gender Equity).

The Charter helps institutions to achieve their gender equality goals, and to meet equality legislative requirements, as well as the requirements of research councils and other funding bodies. It utilises a targeted self-assessment framework to support applicants (universities and colleges) identify areas for positive actions as well as acknowledging good practices already in place; and it supports the advocacy of inclusive working practices that increase the retention of academics, professional and support staff, demonstrating an HEI's commitment to an equitable working environment (Advance HE, 2020a). Although the Charter focuses explicitly on transforming the institutional response and organisational norms for staff and scholars in HEIs, it is not operating in a vacuum protected from the gender norms and stereotypes existent throughout the wider society. The Charter operates within and against such societal tensions, which were also identified as challenges to the implementation processes in the UK based evaluations of Athena SWAN (Graves et al., 2019; Munir et al., 2014).

The Charter is based on ten principles which broadly seek to advance gender equality in academia (Advance HE, 2020). These principles need to be included in the action plans institutions and departments when they submit their application for an Athena SWAN award. Awards are given to institutions and departments within HEIs upon submission of an application. When the national Athena SWAN evaluation committee is satisfied that the action plan outlined in the submission is appropriate and realistic to contextually address the landscape of gender inequalities presented in the application, based on a staff gender profile analysis, then an Athena SWAN award is presented to the receiving institution. The process

is: HEIs start off by submitting an application (to Advance HE in the UK; to the HEA in Ireland) for an institutional Bronze award, including actions they will undertake within four years (under the post-2015 rules) (before reapplying to retain the award, or seek a Silver award, where or when that is applicable based on the institutions performance in addressing gender inequality). The award is therefore retained (or not) based on the continued activity of the institution in implementing the action plans they themselves developed. An entry-level Bronze HEI requires an assessment of gender equality, a four-year action plan to address identified areas of gender inequality, and an organisational structure to implement the proposed actions (Ovseiko et al., 2017). Awards can be made at departmental/school levels within an HEI and also (initially) at the institutional level (an institutional award).

In many respects, Athena SWAN seeks to promote the concept of the gender-sensitive university, despite of and often in tension with the wider societal gender norms and stereotypes which live and breathe throughout our social world. The gender-sensitive university is driven within the Charter by facilitating concerted action to address gender inequalities; by requiring the design and implementation use of contextually designed gender equality plans for each HEI, which cover a range of areas including: 'leadership, organisational culture, recruitment, promotion and retention policies, gender in research' and addressing issues around harassment and assault, as Bencivenga and Drew (2020: 181) outline when describing the concept. Athena SWAN is certainly a tangible way to work towards the goal of a gender-sensitive institution, by tackling gender inequalities and opening up educational and professional opportunities for all genders (Bencivenga and Drew, 2020). However, whilst the adoption of the Charter is to be welcomed, it needs to go 'beyond data collection and monitoring' towards more direct approaches of promoting more women as leaders (Power 2020) otherwise progress will remain slow and incremental at best.

Limitations of the Charter have been identified in the literature, such as the overriding focus on 'box ticking', metrics and the performative 'doing' of equality work without an underpinning of meaningful and sustainable structural and cultural change, overburdening small groups of people (mostly women) with the workload burden imposed by the programme, and resistance to the work by some staff members (Caffrey et al., 2016; Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2019; Ovseiko et al., 2017; Pearce, 2017; Tzanakou and Pearce 2019). O'Connor (2020: 207) concluded from their FI inquiry into the challenges facing male-dominated HEIs in reducing gender inequality, that even a 'potentially transformative institutional interventions such as Athena SWAN' have had limited success in reducing gender inequality, pointing to the institutional structure and culture as perpetuating the phenomenon. This strengthens the argument to explore the micro foundations of gendered HEIs as a way to examine the extent of change Athena SWAN is generating or can generate.

The criticism of Athena SWAN as embodying the performative doing of equality work, as a box-ticking exercise, speaks to Acker's inequality regime work that

examined organising processes that produce inequality, including class hierarchies, recruitment and hiring, wage setting and supervisory practices and informal interactions while 'doing the work'. A number of Affirmative Action programmes (similar to the Athena SWAN Charter) have developed over time to address such inequalities visible in organisations, however Acker (2006: 456) argues that over time they have become 'become mere bureaucratic paper shuffling in most organisations'. To extent to which this could be the destiny for Athena SWAN in Irish HEIs will be part of the narrative explored in an empirical study, described later in the article.

These limitations are also acknowledged as being heavily influenced and determined by wider socio-political factors that go beyond the scope of the Charter (Caffrey et al. 2016). Despite such limitations, intentional institutional reform initiatives, such as the Athena SWAN Charter, play a crucial role in supporting institutional actors develop 'an understanding of what constitutes a good society, without necessarily being able to achieve it, and how alternative institutions may be imagined to contribute to such a world' (March and Olsen, 1989: 91), whether such initiatives meet with resistance or not (Bencivenga and Drew, 2020; Lowndes, 2020).

Athena SWAN Charter evaluations

Two official impact evaluation studies of the Athena SWAN Charter have been commissioned by Advance HE (formerly ECU) in the UK, one conducted in 2013 (Munir et al., 2014), the second in 2018 (Graves et al., 2019). Methods for the studies included survey data, HEI case studies, including cases with awards and without awards. No other countries have commissioned such impact evaluations.

The 2013 study found overall that career satisfaction, opportunities for training and development, knowledge of promotion processes and fairness in the allocation of workload were considered better in the Silver award and other Athena SWAN category groups than in no award departments or institutions. There was also some evidence that women had benefitted from Athena SWAN to a greater extent than men. The Charter had a limited impact on postgraduate students and had not yet reached the undergraduate population. Upon receiving Athena SWAN awards vital actions were mobilised in the institutions and/or departments, including increased departmental engagement in the process, the putting in place of structures and data collection systems, increased engagement of university senior management in the process, improved processes for promotion and reward/review panels, the development of mentoring systems targeted at women, the appointment of designated Athena SWAN officers, changes to the maternity leave cover process and the development of women's networking and leadership training events. Academic staff reported that Athena SWAN had had a greater impact on the work environment and work practices in Silver and Bronze award departments than in departments within an institution with a Bronze award, but no departmental award. There was evidence from the academic/research and

administrative/technical survey responses that some changes in culture and attitude had been achieved, such as institutions and departments had more flexible working arrangements in place in award units as opposed to departments without the award. There was a visible representation of more women in senior roles; this was reported as a positive change driven by Athena SWAN.

The 2018 study mirrored the 2013 study in many ways, particularly in terms of its positive influences within institutions with institutional and departmental awards. It was clear by that time point (in 2018) that Athena SWAN was being used in most HEIs across the UK, as a structured programme to address gender inequalities and challenges; 70 per cent of HEIs in the UK have engaged with the Athena SWAN Charter. A holistic approach targeting cultural change through the reshaping of behaviours and attitudes has revealed that the Charter is commonly perceived as a key tool to help in the process of delivering real behavioural and cultural change. When compared to Silver and Bronze departments/institutes, women in Gold departments/institutes are more satisfied with performance/development reviews, more familiar with criteria and processes for promotion, more likely to have been encouraged to apply for promotion, to believe that there are more flexible working practices, to be more optimistic about career prospects and to have a mentoring scheme available to them. There is some evidence connecting the Charter to higher levels of engagement by women, with departments with an award having on average 7 per cent more female staff compared to no award departments. There is strong evidence that the Charter processes and methodologies have supported cultural and behavioural change – not just around gender equality, but equality and diversity in all its forms. Overall the Charter is viewed as a tool that 'unlocks open communication, honest discussion, real scrutiny of practices and commitment to a common purpose' (Graves et al., 2019: 2). The study revealed considerable challenges which threaten ongoing engagement such as resource requirements (to carry out the Charter actions) and lack of leadership support. These impact evaluations indicate the degree of success the Charter has to institutionalise change within HEIs, and the limits of the programme also.

The following sections deal with the theoretical framework of Feminist Institutionalism (FI), an approach that will be used to explore how and why a gender equality programme, such as Athena SWAN, could be a driver for sustainable change in Irish HEIs.

Theoretical perspective: Feminist institutionalism (FI)

Feminist scholars with an interest in the power structures, relations and inequalities inherent within institutions are mostly concerned with institutional complexes (i.e. the complex way 'things are done around here' in organisations) (Lowndes, 2014). Acker's definition of inequalities in organisations is useful, described as the 'systematic disparities between participants in power and control over goals, resources, and outcomes; workplace decisions such as how to organise work; opportunities for promotion and interesting work; security in employment and

benefits; pay and other monetary rewards; respect; and pleasures in work and work relations' (Acker, 2006: 443). Building on this with the gender perspective of the HEI context, gender inequalities within HEIs involve 'the differential evaluation of men and women, and of areas of predominantly female and predominantly male employment in higher education institutions' (HEIs O'Connor, 2020: 208).

Social and political institutions peak the interest of feminist scholars because of the influence they have in shaping, or, more often than not, frustrating 'the intentions of reforming actors' in order to implement gender-equity strategies (Lowndes, 2014: 689). However, more than this, is the potential for institutions to embed gender-just actions and pledges in a gender-sensitive university where the academy is reconceived as embodying greater inclusiveness in our understanding of gender and intersectionality (Bencivenga and Drew, 2020). It is this potential for reform, change and action that drives the search to uncover how and why institutional rules, processes and norms impact the way in which institutional change can be embedded, in order to inform and improve gender equality programmes and strategies.

Feminist theory awakens us to the masculinity norms which are embedded inextricably within institutions, and how this masculinity plays a significant role in producing and reproducing gendered institutional cultures (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Lovenduski, 2014). A consensus has formed in the field around social construction feminism (Lorber, 2005), essentially agreeing that gender plays a central part in organisational practices (Acker, 1990; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). Feminist theory also alerts us to the creation and re-creation of a gendered understructure by looking at 'organisational practices, the sites of concrete institutional functioning' (Acker, 1992a: 567). Such processes and practices can be identified, and are mirroring elements of social life. Some of which are 'obvious and open; others are deeply embedded and invisible' (Acker, 1992a). Indeed, social and political institutions are embodiments of gender regimes (Acker, 2006); they reflect and consist of masculinist and feminist roles, identities and relations (Lovenduski, 2014).

Acker's work along with notable scholars in the field of institutionalist studies (in particular, Hall, 1986; March and Olsen, 1989; North, 1990) laid the foundation for feminist and institutionalist scholars to come together to create an analytical lens (FI) that would adequately enable an exploration of gendered institutions and their gendering effect (Gains and Lowndes, 2014, 2018; Mackay et al., 2010). Lovenduski (2014) identifies the FI approach as shining a conceptual light on the gendered dimensions of structures of power and behaviour. A primary focus of FI is on the role played by institutional informal structures, processes, values and norms – referred to also as informal institutions (Chappell and Waylen, 2013; Galea et al., 2020; Waylen, 2013). Drawing largely from the interpretative perspective of sociological institutionalism (Powell et al., 2018), FI provides an approach to analyse how informal institutions (Chappell and Waylen, 2013) interact with the formal, codified rules and processes of institutions, and how the interaction between the formal and informal produces gendered outcomes.

It highlights how institutions are gendered, pointing to the roles played by gendered rules, actors and outcomes (Lowndes, 2020). These can determine, and undermine, interactions and behaviour often even when formal rules have been changed (Lowndes, 2020). Feminism strengthens institutionalist approaches conceptually by identifying changing gender relations as a potential cause of institutional change, thus providing FI with the capacity to explore causality between rules and actors, when uncovering why institutions change, in which ways, and most notably, why they do not change (Krook and Mackay, 2011a; Thomson, 2018). FI provides a theoretical lens which makes visible (Lovenduski, 2014) gendered power relations and the processes that support or subvert such relations. It is a useful approach in answering research questions about power relations in public life (Krook and Mackay, 2011b). Coming from this perspective, understanding institutions as 'instruments of social organisation that exercise collective power over a number of generations' (Vickers et al., 1993: 133–134) with power conceptualised as being stratified and unequally distributed within society according to gender, race, sex, sexuality, ability and economic status, is useful when adopting an FI lens. The next section explores the institutional rules, and then how they interact with institutional, that form part of the FI theoretical approach.

Institutional rules

March and Olsen (1983) concluded from their research on the organisation of political life that institutional informal conventions, norms and practices are as significant as formal structures (written, codified rules) in determining human behaviours, interactions and institutional outcomes. This has been found in Ackers work also, on gendered organisations (1990), gendered institutions (1992b) and inequality regimes (2006). Formal and informal institutions combine to create 'stable, valued, recurring patterns of behaviour' (Huntington, 1968: 12 cited in Galea et al., 2020) that influence how 'things are done around here' on a daily basis (Galea et al., 2020). The outcome of this phenomenon is that people living and working within institutions learn and adapt to the 'dos and don'ts' of acceptable behaviours; processes learned on the ground within an organisation, known also as the rules-in-use (also recognised as a combination of formal and informal rules) (Ostrom, 1999). Institutional values and principles are protected by these rules-in-use (Ostrom, 1999). Ostrom (1999: 38) defines institutional rules broadly as 'prescriptions that define what actions (or outcomes) are required, prohibited or permitted, and the sanctions authorised if the rules are not followed'. Uncovering informal institutions (practices, norms, behaviours and discourses – the unseen and the unsaid) and examining how these elements interact with the formal structures provide the analytical framework for FI (Chappell and Waylen, 2013; Mackay, 2011). Informal institutions are not as easily identifiable as formal written rules, as Chappell and Waylen (2013) so rightly state. They can be understood as being 'virtually any behaviour that departs from . . . the written-down

rules' (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004: 727) and 'come from socially transmitted information . . . are part of the heritage we call culture' (North, 1990: 37).

Galea et al. (2020) describe gendered dimensions of informal institutions (practices, narratives and norms) as explaining recruitment and promotion practices in the construction industry, as 'cultural fit' (male sponsorship) and traditional educational pipelines shape the pool of people being recruited into the sector. This research adds to the literature on gendered informal institutions; it furthers sheds light on the role they play in shaping outcomes and practices. HEIs contain normative elements (built on and guided by norms, principles and ideas) that structure their institutional establishment (Lovenduski, 2014). Ahmed's ethnographic research findings and reflections on institutionalising diversity in HEIs (2012) point also to the integral role played by informal practices and how they become formalised over time and cast within institutional memory. Such research mirrors similar ideas and observations from research conducted in an Irish education context (Devine et al., 2011; Harford, 2018; Lynch, 1994; Maxwell et al., 2019; O'Connor, 2020).

Waylen's work on institutional change and gender equality broadly argues that a narrow and limited analysis of a gender equality policy initiative (such as the Athena SWAN Charter) could constrain an examination of the effect of gendered institutions and the role they play in societal interactions (Waylen, 2013), thus possibly compromising the ability 'to answer big questions or resolve (the) structure/agency debate that preoccupies other social scientists' (Mackay, 2011: 195). It is therefore important to account for the institutional and societal context within which a gender equality initiative, programme or strategy – such as the Athena SWAN Charter – seeks to operate, create and embed institutional change (Ní Laoire et al., 2020).

Given that so much within social and political institutions are gendered and have gendered effects, from an FI perspective it is interesting to explore whether formal changes lead to an HEI acting in a way envisioned by the formal rule path, or progress has deviated, or is uncommonly slow. Examples of formal changes are those sanctioned within institutional Athena SWAN Charter action plans, such as changes to career pipeline trajectories (recruitment, retention and promotion policies) and leave policies (maternity, carer and adoption leave, which are gendered (Huppatz et al., 2019; Maxwell et al., 2019). The nuances of the change process prompted by the Athena SWAN Charter, which seeks structural and cultural change through the implementation of contextually developed action plans, is the crux of the theoretical framework being descried in this article, and will be explored in the conduct of the empirical study.

Institutional actors

Within FI there is a core assumption that institutional rules (formal and informal; the rules-in-use) can shape an institution along gendered lines. However, rules alone are inanimate and meaningless – they come alive when in use.

Therefore the institutional actors (people working with these rules, often utilising agency) (Gains and Lowndes, 2018) who adapt, interpret, resist and/or reform these rules (Lowndes, 2020); negotiate with them when in positions of power and authority (Mackay, 2020); when formed as a cohesive minority occupying key positions of authority as 'critical actors' (Thomson, 2018), can shape the way rules and formal processes are realised. Individuals need to be supported as 'gendered actors in gendering institutions', and programmes are most effective 'when undertaken as part of an integrated institutional equality agenda' (O Grada et al. 2015: 358), such as the Athena SWAN Charter situates itself within an institutional infrastructure of structural and cultural change.

As Lowndes (2020) correctly emphasises, an FI perspective reminds us that institutional actors are real people (Mackay, 2011). What is important is not only how people are acting and interacting with formal and informal rules (and rule changes) but what this action means to them. FI advocates to bring 'actors back in to institutionalist theory' (Lowndes, 2020: 559), meaning that the FI theoretical approach recognises and promotes the role played by institutionalist actors, in using rules; in a variety of ways and how this then can affect how a gender-equality initiative or strategy could be implemented; in which ways; and what does the implementation mean to such actors in a reflexive way.

Ambivalent actors

Diversity practitioners and those working to effect gender-just change within institutions (for instance, participating in equality committees or in other diversity activist groups) often develop an ambivalent relationship with the institutions where they work, as indicated by the term *tempered radical*. Such an individual identifies with and is committed to their organisations and also to a cause, community or ideology that is different from (and at odds perhaps) with the dominant culture of their organisation (Meyerson and Scully, 1995). This has been found to describe the attitude of practitioners and broadly institutional actors working to address gender inequality (Ahmed, 2012; O'Connor, 2014). This is an influential notion conceptualised by Meyerson and Scully (1995), describing employees who want to effect change in their organisation whilst holding on to their careers (i.e. outsiders within). Swan and Fox (2010) extended the notion of the tempered radical, conceptualising them as being strictly outsiders who must protect themselves from becoming insiders. Being on the 'inside' in this context refers to attaining access and positions closer to higher management roles and positions, closer to decision-making power and resource allocation management. Swan and Fox (2010) expanded this to include those diversity workers and people working to effect gender-just change whose professional identities and personal beliefs would be closely aligned and could be labelled more as insiders working in diversity.

The role of institutional actors

This idea of the role played by the institutional actors (Gains and Lowndes, 2018; Mackay, 2011) in influencing the implementation of gender-just strategies and programmes, and how they interact with institutional rules in order to effect change, speaks to the early work of Meyerson and Scully. It is echoed in the findings of Ahmed (2012), whose research uncovers the inner conflict of those working for diversity within HEIs, trying to effect change whilst at the same time, remaining loyal to the ideals of the institution. Research on the role of critical actors (a minority of women working to effect change while holding key positions of authority and power) within an FI perspective (Childs and Krook, 2009; Thomson, 2018) poses one explanation of how gender-just strategies (such as Athena SWAN) are being implemented within HEIs, or are being met with resistance.

As Lowndes (2020: 543) points out, actors reproduce gendered institutions by enacting rules; however, they can also initiate and maintain change through adapting, interpreting, resisting or reforming them. Lowndes (2020) emphasises the role of gendered actors in consolidating and generating gendered change. To which extent this is the case- has the potential to be the case- will be queried and explored in the empirical study, outlined in this article.

Institutional change

Broad consensus on implementing change in organisational and institutional practices in academic entities is that it is challenging to engender such change (van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). HEIs are described as often being change averse; 'inert, that is, they resist efforts at change' (Jepperson, 1991: 145) cited in Mahoney and Thelen (2010). Bearing this in mind, it is important to include in a theoretical framework, that seeks to explore institutional change arising from the implementation of a gender-equality initiative (such as Athena SWAN), explanations for institutional change that encompass incremental, ad hoc and slower change experiences and patterns. This is the approach best suited when using an FI lens (Beyeler and Annesley, 2011; Gains and Lowndes, 2018; Krook and Mackay, 2011a; Lowndes, 2020; Mackay et al., 2010; Madsen, 2019; Thomson, 2018).

Theories on institutional change (Lowndes, 2014; Lowndes and Roberts, 2013; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010) can be broadly categorised into two groups. The first being the long-standing path dependency approach (Thelen, 2004), the other the model of endogenous 'institutional refinement', referring to how institutions (formal and informal) evolve organically, over time, and in that process their institutional elements are changed and manipulated to reflect the preferences and goals of higher management/those in positions of power and control (Lowndes, 2014). Mahoney and Thelen (2010: 15) developed a framework for identifying and explaining types of institutional change, which have also been

explored as ways to explain informal institutions, institutional change and gender equality work (Waylen, 2013):

Modes of institutional change

1. Displacement – removal of existing structures, introduction of new ones
2. Layering – introduction of new rules with old ones
3. Drift – changed impact of existing rules due to shifts in the socio-political environment
4. Conversion – the changed enactment of existing rules due to their strategic redeployment (occurs when rule remain the same formally but interpreted and enacted in new ways).

Given the conservative and bureaucratic nature of HEIs and their characteristic 'slow to change' quality (Bird, 2011), institutional change could take the form of *layering* or *conversion* (Lowndes 2020; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010), as opposed to any radical removal of procedures and biases and the introduction of new rules and cultural norms (*displacement* or *drift*). This concept of institutional change occurring 'short of all-out' reform and reflecting the 'below-the-radar change' (Lowndes, 2020: 559) is a refreshing and timely concept that includes modes of institutional change that is more incremental from a gender perspective. This is the pattern of change in large, complex organisations such as HEIs (Bagilhole and White, 2011). Exploring these four different modes of institutional change also highlights how informal rules/norms influence the extent to which formal rules take root; informal institutions can help or hinder formal change (Waylen, 2013).

Bringing it all together: exploring institutional responses to the Athena SWAN Charter as part of an empirical study in Ireland

In Ireland at the time of writing, out of the 27 eligible HEIs, there are currently 56 Bronze award holders (14 institutions, 42 departments) (Advance HE, 2020c). Engagement with the Charter is a key pillar of the national strategy for gender equality, linking progress to institutional eligibility for funding from the main national research funders (HEA, 2018a). An empirical study will be conducted utilising the theoretical framework outlined in this article. The aim of the research is to explore the institutional responses of HEIs to the Athena SWAN Charter, by examining the micro foundations of HEIs as gendered institutions. This will entail a focus on the exchange between formal and informal rules, norms and practices which Athena SWAN actions seek to change; explore the roles played by actors working with the rules (are they enacting the rules or seeking to adapt, interpret, resist or reform them in some way) – as a way to examine the way Athena SWAN is instigating change (and which kind of change (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010)) and

is surfacing resistance within the HEI (Lowndes, 2020), as has been found in other studies examining the effectiveness of the Athena SWAN Charter (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019). The study will focus specifically on universities in Ireland, given the greater challenges facing such HEIs, in terms of the gender profile of those leading and directing the institutions, compared to IoTs (O'Connor, 2014). This is in keeping with Leathwood and Read's (2009) hypothesis that this pool of HEIs occupy an elitist status; that there exists an assumption that men occupy positions of power in such institutions.

This research study is exploratory and novel in its use of the FI theoretical perspective as a way to explore the nuances of the change process instigated and initiated by the Athena SWAN Charter in Ireland. No such study has been conducted yet solely on the Irish context, neither has a study been carried out solely using FI to examine specifically the micro foundations of the institutional responses to the Athena SWAN Charter. In relation to applying an FI perspective to the topic of gender inequality in the Irish higher education staff profile, it has been used in research to explain for the slow rate of change in the gender profile of higher education's professoriate (O'Connor, 2019b), and in identifying aspects of culture and structure in male dominated HEIs that perpetuates gender inequality (O'Connor, 2020).

FI proposes a way of explaining the 'gendered paradox' between the formal frameworks in place in an institution – inherent within a change programme such as Athena SWAN – and outcomes for women in practice (Mackay and Murtagh, 2019). Applying this FI perspective allows for the exploration of the institutional rules (formal and informal) sought to be changed/amended within the Athena SWAN action plan for the institution. The compelling question when exploring the role of institutional actors during the process of implementing an Athena SWAN Charter (realised as a time-limited action plan) in an HEI contextual setting is how they behave with the changes to institutional rules (such as carer leave or promotion schemes), how they seek to change, not change existing rules, or the extent of change welcomed, thus exploring the gap between Athena SWAN actions/commitments and the realities of institutional actors interacting and engaging with these Athena SWAN actions.

The empirical study will involve institutional ethnographic approach (Campbell and Gregor, 2004; Rankin, 2017; Smith, 2005) with a case study research design will be used, involving qualitative research (interviews with documentary analysis of university strategies and Athena SWAN applications) (Ackerly and True, 2010; Prior 2003). This qualitative methodological approach will complement the employment of the FI theoretical framework (Krook and Mackay, 2011b; Mackay, 2020; Mackay and Waylen, 2009). Three Irish universities (three cases), which have attained at a minimum the institutional Bronze Athena SWAN award,[1] will be selected. The three case studies will involve ten interviews for each case (first round of interviews), with five follow-up interviews each (a total

of 45 interviews planned). Interview participants will be purposively sampled using selection criteria in line with the research aim; they will be members of the institutional Athena SWAN self-assessment team (SAT). The interviews, facilitated by the use of an ethnographic approach in the research design, will be open-ended and context-specific to each case. It will be a space to enable reflection of the participants' experience of the Athena SWAN process in their HEI, drawing from the development and use of the guided reflection methodological tool in a gender equality programme (Archibong, 2016). Ethical requirements will be adhered to, strictly protecting the identity of participants who occupy such a relatively small pool of people within the Irish higher education context.

Conclusion

The FI theoretical framework, to be employed in the empirical study outlined in this article, will clarify how HEIs in Ireland have the capacity to make Athena SWAN Charter gender-equity actions (commitments) 'stick' (Htun and Weldon, 2010), whilst being mindful of the role played by traditional gender norms (embedded in historical legacies and informal structures and processes) (Lowndes, 2020), which can undermine the impact of formal institutional change and efforts of institutional actors working with new rules and processes. This is the case when dealing with rules in place as well as proposing new actions and policy changes, all of which are being proposed within the Athena SWAN Charter programme in Ireland. Gender norms and stereotyping in wider society can also undermine and weaken the impact and potential of Athena SWAN actions. However, notwithstanding this, the Charter has great potential in generating institutional change. Concerted action is 'necessary to achieve more gender-sensitive academic environments' (Bencivenga and Drew, 2020: 181), and for the time being at least, the institutionalisation of the Athena SWAN Charter in Irish HEIs is a pathway for this concerted action. The question will remain in the conduct of the empirical study, to what extent is institutional change generated when exploring the institutional micro foundations.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to sincerely thank Dr Caitríona Ní Laoire (ISS21, UCC, Cork, Ireland) and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful and invaluable comments on the draft.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by funding from the

European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No.750408.

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Note

1. Other inclusion criteria for selecting the three universities include: variance across Athena SWAN applications; geographic location in the country; HEIs which have/have had European Commission funded structural projects on the topic of gender; Old universities and newer ones (older cultures and resistance to change and newer (O'Connor, 2014)); National University of Ireland (NUI) versus non-NUI; HEI has applied under the extended Charter (since 2015) or not; Universities with VPs for Equality or none at VP level.

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