

Fostering Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

Summary Report: Athena SWAN Workshops

September 24 to October 4, 2018

Background

Budget 2018 introduced a range of measures that will help to support the participation of underrepresented groups such as women, people with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples and racialized minorities in science and research. A commitment to adopt the Athena SWAN program and to tailor it to the Canadian context was included in these budget measures.

The United Kingdom's Athena SWAN program was established in 2005 to encourage and recognize commitments towards advancing the education and careers of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). UK institutions are invited to sign on to an Athena SWAN Charter and to commit to adopting ten principles focused on promoting and supporting gender equity. In 2015, the UK's Athena SWAN Charter was expanded to recognize work undertaken in support of individuals in the arts, humanities, social sciences, business, and law; professional and support roles; transgender staff and students. Currently there are 143 institutions in the UK that have signed on to the Charter. In addition other countries, including Ireland, the United States and Australia have undertaken their own version of the Athena SWAN program.

The Canadian Context

In Canada, the intention is to tailor the Athena SWAN program to our context and realities, including changing the name and developing a Canadian version of the Charter. Specifically, the vision for the Canadian program is to broaden the scope of the original Athena SWAN to cover all underrepresented groups (not just gender), be relevant to all areas of research (not just STEM), and be open to universities and colleges (not just universities).

The workshops that were held across Canada in September and October of 2018 were an integral part of raising awareness about the Athena SWAN program in Canada and receiving feedback on how to tailor the program to the Canadian context. In addition, consultations also took place before the workshops were held. The Honourable Kirsty Duncan, Minister of Science and Sport hosted cross-country roundtable consultations in the summer of 2018 and a series of information sessions/webinars were hosted by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) in August and September 2018.

Report on Workshop Discussions

The workshops were held in six locations across Canada (Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Montreal, Halifax and Toronto). The format for the workshops consisted of a half day of presentations in the morning by Advance HE (the UK organization responsible for Athena

SWAN) on the evolution of the Athena SWAN program in the UK and worldwide and a presentation on the vision for Athena SWAN in Canada that was led by NSERC on behalf of all three Granting Agencies. The afternoon portion consisted of four breakout sessions on specific questions related to the design of the Athena SWAN program in Canada.

This report highlights the issues that were raised during the six workshops. While an effort has been made to reflect comments heard and to summarize the main points of discussion in this report, some may have been missed or may not be clearly reported. If you feel that your views are not represented, please send an email to the consultations mailbox (consultations@nserc-crsng.gc.ca) with your feedback.

While each workshop had their own unique aspects there were several themes that emerged in the discussions across all the workshops.

Goals/Objectives of the Pilot

- An important theme that emerged across the workshops relates to the objectives of the pilot, what the Government hopes to achieve with the pilot, and indicators of success.
- Participants made the point that programs like Athena SWAN are about cultural change and that this kind of change takes time and therefore it is important to look at Athena SWAN with a longer-term lens.
- Change is broader than just at the institutional level and is related to change across the research ecosystem. In this context, there was considerable discussion about the criteria that are currently used to define research excellence.
 - For example, factors related to publications (e.g., number of publications) are often considered to be important indicators of research excellence. Many participants felt that the type of criteria considered part of research excellence needed to be broadened to include other types of initiatives that contribute to the broader research community (e.g., outreach and mentoring).
 - It was felt that members of underrepresented groups are often disadvantaged if the criteria for research excellence are narrow. There was a strong sentiment that it would be difficult to achieve real long-term change until broader criteria are considered.
- Helping to drive change in the research ecosystem was identified by many as a potential long-term objective of Athena SWAN.

Scope of the pilot

- Participants were particularly interested to know what the scope of the pilot would be in Canada. The vision for the made-in-Canada Athena SWAN program to include all underrepresented groups and for the pilot to apply to all disciplines (not just STEM), was explained during the morning sessions.

- However, participants had additional questions and comments on the scope of the pilot. The general view was that the pilot should be as inclusive as possible. The following points were made as part of that discussion:
 - In order to meet the realities of the Canadian context, the pilot needs to be broader than just gender.
 - Most people agreed that it is important to include all disciplines and not just STEM in the pilot since underrepresented groups in all disciplines faced the sort of challenges that Athena SWAN aims to address.
 - Post-docs and students are the pipeline to faculty and as such many people thought they need to be considered as part of the pilot.
 - Some people commented that there are other types of groups that are underrepresented in post-secondary institutions beyond the four designated groups. For example, some institutions mentioned first generation graduates (i.e. first in their family to attend a post-secondary institution) as an example of a group that is challenging to attract and retain.
 - With regard to the types of awards that would be available under the pilot, some participants suggested that Departmental level awards should be available in addition to Institutional level awards.
- While there was support for the pilot being broad and inclusive, a note of caution was also made by some that it is important to ensure that the pilot is not too broad to the point of making it too difficult to achieve the intended objectives. Some participants commented that a smaller version of the pilot should be implemented first to improve chances of success.

Resources and Burden on Institutions

- While there was strong support for the idea of an Athena SWAN program in Canada, one of the main challenges identified by workshop participants was the amount of work that an Athena SWAN application would take for institutions and the resources needed to undertake the work.
- While everyone agreed that EDI is important, there was a view expressed that it is important that Athena SWAN build on other initiatives (e.g., Canada Research Chairs Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plans, Universities Canada Inclusive Excellence Principles) rather than duplicating them, to ease the burden on institutions.
- Another aspect related to resources concerns differences between small, medium and large institutions.
 - Small institutions expressed the view that EDI can be challenging for them as they generally lack the resources to put in place robust EDI initiatives compared to larger institutions.
 - On the other hand, large institutions argued that they deal with a higher level of complexity which makes implementing EDI initiatives a challenge in their institutions.
 - The key point that was highlighted in the end was that small and large institutions face unique challenges and that this needs to be kept in mind in the program design

for Athena SWAN and the new equity grant program that was also announced in Budget 2018.

- Another aspect related to resources that was raised is that workload for EDI initiatives like Athena SWAN often falls on individuals from underrepresented groups. This has been found in other countries with Athena SWAN programs, such as the UK.
 - The additional burden on individuals from underrepresented groups of coordinating EDI initiatives such as Athena SWAN means that there is less time for them to concentrate on research which often puts them at a further disadvantage.
 - In addition, when EDI work is being undertaken only by underrepresented groups it isn't mainstreamed throughout the institution and as such the prospect of making long-term cultural change is reduced.
 - Workshop participants identified this issue as something that needs to be taken into account for the Canadian version of Athena SWAN.
- Participants stressed the fact that NSERC and the Granting Agencies will have to provide support to the institutions that will be part of the pilot, in terms of providing human resources, templates, examples, etc.
- In addition, participants highlighted the importance of informal networks so that institutions can support each other in the implementation of Athena SWAN initiatives.

Data

Data was identified as one of the major challenges with a program like Athena SWAN. There were multiple aspects to this discussion including identification of challenges and some potential solutions. The challenges included:

- The need to streamline data requirements. Being asked to collect data in different ways for different programs only increases the burden on institutions.
- The need to access better data. Many people expressed the view that while some data on underrepresented groups is available, it is varied and the type of data needed to paint a full picture of the institution is not always available/currently collected.
- Anonymity/privacy concerns were also raised as a challenge. Much of the data that is currently collected by institutions is collected for purposes other than Athena SWAN and as such some questioned whether this data could be used to support an Athena SWAN application. In addition, the point was made that use of data is often governed by provincial privacy laws and that those laws often differ by province. This was seen as a complicating factor for a national program like Athena SWAN.

Workshop participants suggested several solutions that they felt would help ease the burden on institutions with regards to data:

- The point was made quite strongly at all the workshops that the federal government should take a leadership role by providing a framework for the type of data that should be collected by institutions for Athena SWAN. This framework should streamline the data collection process so that it would be consistent with requirements for other programs and initiatives (e.g., the CRC program).

- In addition, participants felt that the federal government needs to play a central role in the data process by providing benchmark data for institutions to with which to compare themselves. While the Athena SWAN process assesses institutions on their own merits and doesn't compare institutions, it was felt that it would be helpful to institutions to know where they stand on a national and regional level as part of the process of identifying the challenges that they need to address.
- While there was a message that it was important for the federal government to provide a framework for data collection, there was also a message that flexibility is important. Institutions need to have flexibility to report based on their own realities. For example, data that is important for large/urban institutions may not have the same significance for small/rural institutions.
- Professional associations (e.g., disciplinary organization, scientific societies etc.) have data that can be used and that should be leveraged to save time for the institutions.

Importance of Consultation and Buy-In at All Levels

- A key message heard across all of the workshops was that it is very important to ensure that all implicated stakeholders, organizations, and individuals are consulted in the design of the Athena SWAN program. A key aspect of this was to ensure that there is buy-in at all levels of an organization.
 - Most participants felt that getting buy-in from senior level administrators in post-secondary institutions was not generally a problem. However, the buy-in didn't always translate into concrete actions within institutions.
 - Often the challenge is to get support from the middle manager level (e.g. Department Heads) as in some cases, people at the middle manager level may have concerns related to a program like Athena SWAN.
 - Given that, it was deemed important to reach out to these types of people to ensure that their concerns were heard and taken into account.
- Only by engaging all types of viewpoints at all different levels of an organization can we ensure that there is real buy-in for the program.

Athena SWAN Program Design

An important consideration during the breakout sessions was the program design for Athena SWAN. As part of the breakout sessions, participants were asked their views on the principles that should make up the Athena SWAN charter and also the award/evaluation criteria for the program.

- On Charter principles, many people expressed the opinion that the principles should be kept as general and high level as possible in order to be inclusive of all groups.
 - Participants noted that many of the UK Athena SWAN principles are focused on gender and are quite specific (e.g., the gender pay gap) and many participants felt

- that this model would not work in the Canadian context given the intention to broaden the program to include other underrepresented groups.
- Some people pointed to the UK Race Equality Charter (which has high-level principles) as a model that could be tailored to the Canadian context and adapted to be inclusive of all underrepresented groups.
 - While many people expressed a preference for general principles, others felt that the principles should be more specific and measurable so that higher management in institutions would put concrete measures in place to reach them.
 - There was also a strong sentiment that there should be a specific principle relating to Indigenous Peoples. It was pointed out that Indigenous Peoples should not be considered an equity seeking group. Many people suggested that a principle related to Indigenous Peoples should be connected to the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.
 - Participants also suggested other concepts that should be kept in mind while drafting the principles including:
 - Ensuring that all underrepresented groups are recognized in the principles – people cautioned that we should be careful not to be “exclusive in our inclusivity” by for example naming specific groups in the principles.
 - Covering intersectionality in the principles since many members of underrepresented groups may identify with more than one group.
 - Recognizing the importance of promotion opportunities and career progression for underrepresented groups in the principles.
 - Ensuring that the concept of empowering the professoriate to deal with challenges in the institution is reflected in the principles.
 - With regard to award/evaluation criteria, there was general agreement that the UK Athena SWAN evaluation process was a good starting point. In this context, some of the suggestions for how institutions should be evaluated included:
 - The quality of the self-assessment (e.g., whether it is frank and honest) and how the self-assessment team was formed (e.g., is it inclusive of all viewpoints and is the representation on the committee broader than just underrepresented groups).
 - The quality of the action plan and whether it is SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound);
 - Whether the policies and actions in the plan are appropriate for the context of the institution – many people mentioned that it is important not to have a one size fits all approach and to recognize that institutions have unique characteristics and differing contexts that need to be taken into account as part of the evaluation process.
 - Whether the institution has a good plan to measure progress.
 - Strong qualitative measures – the point was made that while data is important, it is also important to consider the lived experiences of underrepresented groups.

Federal-Provincial Jurisdiction

- Given that education is under provincial jurisdiction some people expressed a concern that the Athena SWAN program may be seen by some as going beyond federal responsibility.
- Participants highlighted the importance of the federal government undertaking discussions with the provinces about the implementation of Athena SWAN.
- Participants mentioned that some provinces are already asking institutions to create EDI plans, so they questioned how this would differ at the federal level.

Challenges Faced in Making Change in Institutions

- In addition to comments that were specifically related to Athena SWAN there was also discussion of issues that related more generally to EDI and the challenges faced in making change in post-secondary institutions. Some of those comments included:
 - EDI needs to be a consideration in all aspects of the operation of an institution in order for real change to occur.
 - Some participants suggested that real change might mean deconstructing some systems in institutions instead of trying to fix them.
 - Participants suggested that institutions themselves need to play an active role in consulting underrepresented groups in their regions in order to determine the challenges that they face and measures to address those challenges.
 - Tenure and non-mandatory retirement was often cited as a challenge for many institutions in terms of something that can inhibit cultural change.

Next Steps

- These six workshops are only part of an ongoing consultation process on the implementation of the Athena SWAN program.
- Going forward, further consultations are planned with the stakeholder community in 2018 and early 2019 on the Athena SWAN program generally and also specifically on the development of principles for the Canadian version of the Athena SWAN charter. Consultations will be held in smaller groups and more targeted so that underrepresented groups feel safer to express their opinions.
- Participants also suggested several next steps that could be taken by the federal government to support institutions including:
 - Developing a robust communications plans so that everyone in the post-secondary community is aware of the Athena SWAN program.
 - Providing a glossary that explains the different terms used related to equity, diversity and inclusion.
 - Providing references on the web for institutions to get tools on how to build their Athena SWAN application.
 - Having mentors and known personalities in the research landscape act as champions to promote equity, diversity and inclusion.

ANNEX

Dates and locations of the workshops

PROVINCE	CITY	DATE	LOCATION
British Columbia	Vancouver	Monday, September 24, 2018	University of British Columbia
Alberta	Calgary	Tuesday, September 25, 2018	University of Calgary
Manitoba	Winnipeg	Thursday, September 27, 2018	University of Manitoba
Quebec	Montreal	Monday, October 1, 2018	Université du Québec à Montréal
Atlantic	Halifax	Wednesday, October 3, 2018	Dalhousie University
Ontario	Toronto	Thursday, October 4, 2018	Lassonde School of Engineering, York University