

20 years of Athena Swan (2005-25)

Year	Milestone	Notes
2005	Athena SWAN Charter launched with 10 founding members	The Athena SWAN Charter was launched on 22 June 2005 at an event hosted by the Institute of Physics and chaired by its President, Sir John Enderby. The Charter originated from the Athena Project, a four-year sector-wide project hosted by the Royal Society aimed at advancing women's careers in Science, Engineering, and Technology (SET). The Athena Project supported local academic women's networks, including London Metropolitan University's Scientific Women's Academic Network (SWAN), which conceptualised the SWAN Charter. The SWAN Charter proposed a national approach to address the inequalities within STEM and aimed to complement existing policies of higher education institutions (HEIs), enable HEIs to formally pledge support and develop actions, and inform policy and practice via a bottom-up approach. The SWAN Charter was chosen by the Athena Project as the means to speed progress towards the achievement of its aims: 'the advancement and promotion of the careers of women in science, engineering and technology in higher education and research, and to achieve a significant increase in the number of women recruited to top posts'.

		Ten universities initially signed up to the Charter Principles as Founder Signatories: University of Bristol, University of Cambridge, Heriot-Watt University, Imperial College London, Loughborough University, University of Oxford, University of Plymouth, University of Southampton, Queen's University Belfast and University College London. The Athena SWAN Charter was managed by the Royal Society until 2006 when it moved to Equality Challenge Unit (ECU, now Advance HE).
2006	First Athena SWAN awards conferred	In May 2006, the first Athena SWAN Bronze awards were given to Keele University and the Universities of Bristol, Edinburgh, Nottingham, Oxford, Plymouth, Southampton, Sunderland and York. Silver awards were given to Imperial College, London, and Edinburgh's Chemistry Department.
2007	First Athena SWAN Departmental Gold award to York Chemistry	In 2007, the University of York's Chemistry Department was given the first Athena SWAN Gold award. This has since been renewed three times ¹ . In 2025, there are 39 Athena Swan Departmental Gold award holders. ²

¹ <https://www.york.ac.uk/chemistry/about/news/2024/athena-swan-gold-renewed/>

² Tableau, 15.5.25

2011

The National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) links Medical Sciences funding eligibility to an Athena SWAN Silver award.³ By 2020, when the funding link was removed, there were over 145 medical sciences award holders.

In July 2011, Professor Dame Sally Davies, then Director General of Research and Development and Chief Scientific Adviser at the UK government's Department of Health, sought to incentivise universities to accelerate women's advancement and leadership. Specifically, the Department of Health stated that in the 2016 competition for NIHR Biomedical Research Centre/ University (BRC/U) funding it did not expect to shortlist any hospital/university partnership where the academic partner had not achieved at least the silver departmental Athena SWAN award. In 2012, this condition was extended to include patient safety and care centres.

In 2016, the first round of funding to be awarded since the Chief Medical Officer's announcement, the Department of Health awarded £816m to 20 BRCs, all of which were associated with a Silver Athena SWAN award-holding academic unit.

Following Dame Sally Davies' announcement, applications to Athena SWAN from medical-related departments increased by almost 400% and award holders grew from approximately 10 departments in medical/health-related disciplines in 2011 to 145 in 2020. Of these more than 60 were held by medical schools – including one Gold by Leeds Medical School.

The initiative strengthened women's research leadership in Medical Sciences.⁴ The proportion of women in mid-level theme lead positions in BRU/Cs was 8% in both 2006 and 2011, which increased to 24% in 2016 after the introduction of the funding incentives. Similarly, proportion of funding obtained by female theme leads increased from 5% in 2006 and 4% in 2011 to 21% in 2016.

³ [Research intelligence - Breaking through the glass ceiling | Times Higher Education \(THE\)](#)

⁴ <https://www.bmj.com/content/371/bmj.m3975>

		Recognising the progress that had been made, the funding condition was removed in 2020 as part of wider government initiative to reduce bureaucracy in medical research. ⁵
2014	Athena SWAN membership extended to include Research Institutes. ⁶	Following a 2013 pilot, a new application route was opened for Research Institutes, in 2014, which had previously not been eligible to apply. As at May 2025, the Athena Swan Charter has 17 Research Institute (RI) members. Among 16 RI award holders, eight are Bronze, 7 Silver and one Gold.
2015	Post-May 2015 Charter launched, broadening scope to gender equality across all disciplines, professional technical and operational staff and trans inclusion.	In response to demand from the higher education sector and building on the findings of a pilot Gender Equality Mark run by ECU, the Athena SWAN Charter expanded its focus in 2015 from STEM disciplines to include arts, humanities, social science, business and law (AHSSBL) disciplines in the UK. It included the experiences of both academic and professional and support staff (PSS) for the first time, as well as students at departmental level. Institutions were required for the first time to consider the intersection of gender & ethnicity/race, and the experience of trans people.

⁵ [NIHR responds to the Government's call for further reduction in bureaucracy with new measures | NIHR](#)

⁶ [Research institutes | Advance HE](#)

2015	First international adaptations of Athena SWAN in Ireland and Australia, building on the success of the UK Charter	In a major national initiative supported by the Higher Education Authority, the Athena SWAN Charter was launched in Ireland in early 2015, engaging all higher education institutions in the country. In August 2015, Athena SWAN also expanded to Australia. Via a collaborative partnership with Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) Forum, a three-year pilot of Athena SWAN in Australia was launched. So, 2025, is also the 10-year Anniversary of Athena Swan in both Ireland and Australia. Currently four countries outside of the UK are piloting or implementing Advance HE's Athena Swan Charter (Australia, Cyprus, Ireland, and Switzerland), with 70 institutions engaged.
2016	First Arts Humanities, Social Sciences, Business and Law (AHSSBL) departmental awards conferred	In the first round of applications since the Charter was extended to cover subjects beyond STEM, the Departments of Modern Languages, and Sociology, Social policy and Social work at Queen's University in Belfast, Departments of Economics and History, Classics and Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh and Durham University's School of Government and International Affairs were awarded a Bronze Athena SWAN Charter mark⁷.

⁷ [First non-STEM Athena SWAN winners named | THE News](#)

2017	First institutional Gold to a Research Institute – the John Innes Centre	The John Innes Centre in Norwich joined the Charter in 2014 and was awarded its first Athena SWAN Gold award in 2017. The Gold award recognised a culture that embraces flexibility and family-friendly working practices, while demonstrating a commitment to career advancement for all. ⁸ It was renewed in 2023. ⁹
2020	Independent Review of Athena SWAN published ¹⁰	Advance HE commissioned an Independent Review in April 2018, recognising the need for the Athena SWAN Charter to be fit for the future, while maintaining rigour and credibility, and reducing the administrative workload for applicants. The Review was led by Professor Julia Buckingham, then Vice-Chancellor of Brunel University and Chair of Universities UK. The Review reported in March 2020, setting out 41 recommendations to ensure the Charter meets these challenges and is fit for purpose for the future of higher education¹¹. The Review also built on the findings of the 2019 independent impact evaluation of the Charter.¹²

⁸ [Athena SWAN's lasting impact | Advance HE](#)

⁹ [Celebrating Athena Swan Gold award renewal | John Innes Centre](#)

¹⁰ [Athena SWAN strengthened and fit for the future | Advance HE](#)

¹¹ [Review of the Athena SWAN Charter: Report and Appendices | Advance HE](#)

¹² [An Impact Evaluation of the Athena SWAN Charter \(2019\) | Advance HE](#)

	Athena Swan Governance Committee formed to oversee the development of the Charter.¹³	Formed by an open call to ensure representation from across the sector, the Athena Swan Governance Committee (ASGC) provides assurance, expert advice and guidance to Advance HE on the transformation and ongoing enhancement of the Athena Swan charter in the UK. Professor Parveen Yaqoob, Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of Reading was its first Chair. The current Chair is Professor Sara Mole, University College London's Envoy for Gender Equality.
2021	Transformed Athena Swan Charter launched to reduce burden and enhance flexibility for members	On 30th June 2021, having undertaken a holistic and member-led transformation of the Charter framework and processes, Advance HE launched the transformed Athena Swan Charter, including: + New Charter Principles + Revised award criteria + Updated application materials + New panel processes. + Proactive guidance Key drivers of the transformation were the need to reduce the administrative burden and to increase flexibility and autonomy for members to apply the charter in their own context.¹⁴ After a transitional period, the transformed Charter framework has been used by all applicants since 2023.

¹³ [Athena Swan Governance Committee | Advance HE](#)

¹⁴ [A step-change for gender equality – the transformed UK Athena Swan Charter is launched today | Advance HE](#)

2023	Reading Technical Services Department achieves first Professional, Technical and Operational (PTO) Directorate Athena Swan award¹⁵	The Transformed Athena Swan Charter introduced a new route for Professional, Technical and Operational (PTO) directorates to apply for Athena Swan awards. The PTO Directorate Framework was piloted between autumn 2021 and spring 2024. Participants included careers, IT, libraries, technical services, estates, external relations, student recruitment, faculty office and research-related departments. By the end of the pilot, four PTO applicants had successfully applied for awards, three Bronze and one Silver awards conferred, the latter to Reading. In late 2024, the ASGC reviewed the pilot findings and recommended that the PTO application route be retained.
	Nottingham is the first UK University to be awarded Athena Swan Gold	The University of Nottingham was one of the first institutions to join the Charter and was awarded an Athena Swan Institutional Bronze award in 2006. The University went on to achieve an Institutional Silver award in 2012, which was renewed in 2018 before gaining a Gold award in November 2023. The Gold award recognised Nottingham's success in advancing gender equality internally as well as in leading work across Nottinghamshire to diversify the workforce in all anchor employers in the region, including NHS recruitment, building on research on gendered language and recruitment practices.¹⁶

¹⁵ [First technical directorate awarded Athena Swan | Advance HE](#)

¹⁶ [News - University of Nottingham is first to achieve prestigious Athena Swan Gold award - University of Nottingham](#)

2024	Gold awards follow for Aston University and Queen's University Belfast	Aston University's first Athena Swan Gold award recognises a range of achievements including reducing the overall and professorial gender pay gap, development of inclusive policies and support around parenting, menopause, domestic violence and miscarriage, and support to gender equality in higher education internationally.¹⁷ Queen's University Belfast (QUB) was one of 10 founding members of the Athena Swan Charter, holding an institutional Silver award since 2007. In addition to the institutional Gold award, all 15 Schools at Queen's hold Athena Swan awards (3 Gold, 7 Silver and 5 Bronze). The QUB Gold award recognised improving gender balance across roles and grades –with more than three times (34%) the percentage of women professors today than 25 years ago (11%), as well as flexible and agile working approaches, and policies supporting colleagues undergoing menopause or fertility treatment.¹⁸
2025	20-year anniversary of the UK Athena Swan Charter	In its 20th anniversary year, the UK Athena Swan Charter has 132 members, and 123 institutional award holders, of which 4 are Gold, 48 Silver and 71 Bronze (May 2025). As at May 2025, the Charter has 858 departmental award holders, of which 39 are Gold, 299 Silver, and 520 Bronze.

¹⁷ [Athena Swan | Aston University](#)

¹⁸ [Celebrating Athena Swan Gold at Queen's | Advance HE](#)