

Athena SWAN: “Institutional peacocking” in the neoliberal university

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Abstract

This paper contributes to understandings of how Athena SWAN (AS) is shaping contemporary equality work in the context of the neoliberal university, and whether it is contributing to performative ways of doing equality work. We center our research on the exploration of the question of how the gender-agenda is being captured by the neoliberal agenda, drawing on 35 in-depth qualitative interviews with AS champions across the UK and Republic of Ireland. The core aim of the study is to explore how AS has been co-opted and mobilized as a vehicle for contemporary (neoliberal) equality work. We argue that rather than contributing to transformational change, AS serves as an effective tool for institutional reputation gains and (extended) virtue signaling, conceptualized and coined here as “*institutional peacocking*.” This in turn, functions and is implemented in diverse institutional settings, with primarily institutional benefit, at the cost of AS champions who carry out gender equality work. We contribute empirically and conceptually to theorizations and current understandings of gender equality work in higher education, especially through AS champions' experience and the institutional benefits that present opportunity costs for some individuals, potentially serving to further entrench stereotyped perceptions of who *should* be doing equality work in universities, and critically, how institutions benefit.

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KEYWORDS

Athena SWAN, equality, gender, neoliberalism, performance management

1 | INTRODUCTION

Athena SWAN (AS), a higher education gender equality initiative, has been enthusiastically embraced by universities both in the UK and around the world, enabling institutions to demonstrate their commitment to gender equality in a deeply marketized and competitive sector that is increasingly driven by metrics, rankings, and accreditations. Serving as the core rationale for this research, AS, although noble in its intentions, has been absorbed into the wider rhetoric of neoliberalism and performative ways of doing gender equality work in the academy, while vast gender inequality, gender pay gaps, and vertical gender segregation remain. It is noteworthy that our findings are in stark contrast to those of Advance HE (2020a, 2020b) who in their recent impact assessment of AS claim that “The charter has made a really significant difference for women’s careers. Research shows that 93% of Champions believe that the charter has had a positive impact on gender issues in their university, department, or research institute” (ibid, 2021a, 2021b).

Our study explores AS champions’ perspectives and experiences of AS as a modus for addressing gender inequality, encouraging and recognizing commitment to advancing the careers of women in higher education, as well as exploring how the AS framework is mobilized and capitalized upon by institutions. From the findings, we coin and define “*institutional peacocking*” as the virtue signaling that institutions engage in to demonstrate that they are active in equality work and “*doing the morally right thing*” while vertical gender segregation, gender pay gaps, and the disproportionate burdening of women with equality work remain prevalent. We argue that universities peacock AS awards to stand out from other institutions and demonstrate their (gender) equality credentials, in other words, “peacocking” their equality credentials, such as AS awards, for market and reputational gain. We contend from this research, which has been conducted entirely independently of Advance HE, that this serves as a further personification of audit culture in the context of the “performative university” (Blackmore & Sachs, 2003), an extolling of virtue with little concrete change in real terms. In a sector where extolling virtue and “*institutional peacocking*” around equality are closely linked to a managerial culture of competition, market orientation, rankings, and league tables, this work contributes empirically and conceptually to contemporary debates around who stands to benefit most from AS awards. Our findings make clear that there is a stark incongruence between institutional gain, leverage, and improvements in gender equality. Interestingly, on many universities’ publicly available webpages, AS awards are shown in the same section or alongside other awards and rankings, such as the Times Higher Education World University Rankings and QS World University Rankings. It is here whereby the notion of “*institutional peacocking*” differs from mere virtue signaling, in that the demonstration of equality work and AS awards are actively peacock, with the awards of gold, silver, and bronze being elaborately featured and mobilized as a vehicle for short-term micro-level change and reputational gain, rather than institutional-level cultural and transformational change. As such, we posit that “*institutional peacocking*” is an augmentation of virtue signaling, in that virtue signaling may be seen as mere posing, but that critically, institutional peacocking serves as a further formalized process and contemporary form of the politics of documentation. We found that there is a strong perception amongst AS champions of an increasing alignment between strategic neoliberal objectives and performative demonstrations of equality work.

The paper is structured as follows; first, we explore aspects of the extant literature, situating this research in the current discourse as well as situating the research in the higher education context. We then discuss our methods, approach to the research, and its limitations, followed by the presentation and discussion of the findings. Strategic recommendations for institutions, Advance HE, and AS governing body are then offered. It is important to also make clear the wider international relevance of this research, in that the AS initiative is gaining increasing traction around the world (Gibney, 2017), though it has been functioning in the UK since 2005. Thus, we present the experiences and

learnings from AS Champions, which may contribute to understandings of how the (equality) performance paradox distorts gender equality goals and women's inclusion in higher education and may serve to further entrench stereotyped perceptions of who *should* be doing equality work in universities and who stands to benefit from it. We extend, for example, the work of Tzanakou and Pearce (2019) in that we have found evidence of the active embrace of market logic that they predicted, as well as the work of Schmidt et al. (2020) and Blackmore and Sachs (2003), by empirically evidencing the developing marketization and neo-liberalization of the equality and diversity agenda. We argue that gender equality is being captured through performative ways by neoliberal institutions for reputational gains. Thus, rather than AS being a driver for gender equality as envisaged, neoliberalism has distorted gender equality goals.

1.1 | Literature review

In the following section, we review existing research on the higher education sector where gender inequality is endemic, the gender pay gap remains persistent and stark (UCU, 2021), and where the neoliberal agenda has vastly permeated institutions. The extant literature (Barnard, 2017; Caffrey et al., 2016; Munir et al., 2013; Pearce, 2017) still tends to focus on the efficacy of gender equality programs, and while there is a growing body of literature which explores the marketization of equality and diversity initiatives, there is scope for further exploration of the lived experiences of "equality champions" such as AS champions, to contribute to better understandings of implementation, action plans, and the perceptions of linkages between marketization, gender equality, and neo-liberalization, particularly in a context that fetishizes rankings and accreditations (Willmott, 2011).

1.2 | The "transformed AS charter"

While there have been positive changes associated with the introduction of AS, such as some positive impact on women's career progression (Munir et al., 2013), engaging staff in gender equality (Barnard, 2017), stimulating management conversations, and, to an extent, action around gender inequality in the university. There is a disconnect between what the aims of AS are and what occurs in the university in terms of transformational change such as improvement in women's representation and equality, particularly when we consider the ongoing lack of gender equality in senior management positions in universities, and ongoing sector-wide gender pay gaps, despite the implementation of AS since 2005 (Ovseiko et al., 2017). With reference to the recent review of AS (Advance HE, 2021a) and the "transformed charter," which claims to have undergone "a shift from prescription, to autonomy and flexibility" (ibid, 2021a), it is clearly a positive step that the implementation of AS has been reviewed, but from our research, it remains evident that regardless of small improvements for women in the academy, AS holds the potential to be (mis)-used for institutional reputational gain, conceptualized here as "institutional peacocking." This research has found that women and other minority groups disproportionately carry out the undervalued, overlooked, yet intensive administrative work of implementing AS, as a part of the wider (inequitable) organization of labor in the organization.

The review of AS by Advance HE includes "key enhancements" (Advance HE, 2021c) such as the consideration of reducing the administrative burden experienced by AS champions. However, this research offers independent empirical insights that cast light on the burdensome work of AS champions, the way in which they are resourced and supported (or not), the reputational gains made by universities, and in turn is used to promote the institution that performs "institutional peacocking" around gender equality. It is also important to make clear that in some domains of the university, such as in STEMM disciplines, there has been a positive linkage between funding incentivization and women's research leadership (Ovseiko et al., 2020), albeit women remain subject to vertical gender segregation and discrimination. We acknowledge that the new framework does potentially provide opportunities for change and improvement. However, insights from AS champions that were collected anonymously and, critically,

independently of Advance HE demonstrate that much further institutional level support, as well as a further streamlining of the reporting process, is required to not only improve the champions' lived experiences of AS as a process but also prevent the further burdening of those implementing AS, who are disproportionately people who experience inequality.

1.3 | The performance paradox and institutional rent seeking

It would be trite to merely explore the efficacy of AS, as this is well-established in the extant literature; rather, we focus on AS as a vehicle for contemporary, neoliberal equality work that is mobilized by universities for institutional peacocking, which disproportionately burdens women and other minority groups for institutional gain. In so doing, we contribute to, and extend, current debates surrounding the performativity of gender equality work and the capturing of gender equality goals for institutional gain, conceptualized here as "institutional peacocking" in higher education. Drawing on the work of Espeland and Sauder (2007) on reactivity and rankings, we argue that the institutional chasing of AS awards (as a form of ranking) shapes reactivity and, in turn, gendered social realities in universities, contributing to the establishment of the (equality) "performance paradox" (Frost & Brockmann, 2014; Meyer & Gupta, 1994; Osterloh & Frey, 2020). We combine the notion of the performance paradox (Meyer & Gupta, 1994) with the notion of institutional rent seeking of AS as a vehicle through which neoliberal universities engage in institutional equality peacocking to maximize reputational gains associated with AS awards, and indeed that the gender agenda has been captured by the neoliberal agenda, serving as an "empty shell" whereby "policies are exercises in image management and that, in practice, inequality persists within the organization" (Hoque & Noon, 2004, p. 482). The notion of the empty shell comes to the fore when the relatively persistent gender pay gap in UK universities is considered alongside the rise of AS awards.

Many higher education institutions increasingly "focus on performance indicators but not on the performance they are supposed to indicate" (Osterloh & Frey, 2020, p. 5). In the most extreme sense, the gamification of equality awards such as AS, and performative ways of doing equality work, may be seen as a form of institutional rent seeking (Muller, 2017), whereby universities seek to maximize market share as well as reputational gains. In turn, AS serves as a fruitful tool through which universities may further such aims by "peacocking" their efforts.

Furthermore, we draw on Ahmed's (2007) work on the politics of documentation, whereby policies and documents are created and the resultant awards serve as a predominant part of equality work. While Ahmed's work refers to race and organizations' legal requirement to promote race equality (2007, p. 590), notionally, the concept of the politics of documentation can also be applied to gender equality in that AS is a form of equality documentation that points toward future action. We begin from one of Ahmed's final comments around documentation, "with an uncertainty about what these documents will do. They might, at certain points, even cause trouble" (ibid, 2007, p. 607). It is here that we link the politics of documentation to AS, particularly since it is women and minority groups who disproportionately carry out AS work and, in turn, are disproportionately burdened, which in and of itself is troubling.

It is also important to highlight that this research was conducted prior to the AS amendments that were announced in June 2021 and are now referred to as the "enhanced AS framework," whereby the main change has resulted in increased institutional autonomy, albeit the findings suggest that this, in and of itself, has not, and will not, change the way in which AS is mobilized as a (virtue) signaling tool. In an extremely competitive sector, AS awards are highly sought after, yet we have found that the administrative work of applying for and achieving AS awards is disproportionately carried out by women and other minority groups (see also Teelken & Deem, 2013), as well as by individuals who are precariously employed (Caffrey et al., 2016; Ovseiko et al., 2017) or employed only until an AS award has been achieved. While there is research that suggests that there are positive patterns that have emerged (Munir et al., 2013) and that there is a positive correlation between institutions that have AS awards and their QS rankings, with Xiao et al. (2020) finding that "Athena SWAN Charter members had increasingly higher women's

representation than those not in the Charter" ($p < 0.05$). Silver-award institutions ranked higher in QS rankings than Bronze award institutions ($\beta = 11.80, p < 0.05$) (ibid, 2020, p. 1), we find that AS, when deliberated alongside the notion of rankings that the award serves as an effective tool for institutional peacocking rather than positive and transformational changes in gender equality in the institution, which are also predicated on the work and goodwill of women and other minority groups.

1.4 | Neoliberalism and higher education

Much has been written about the paucity of women's careers in the higher education sector (e.g., see Doherty & Manfredi, 2006; Fogelberg et al., 1999; Thomas & Davies, 2002). The higher education sector has experienced decades of neoliberalism with various performance measurement regimes being introduced (Deem & Brehony, 2005; Deem & Lucas, 2007; Morley, 2003). The implementation of neoliberalism in the higher education sector was designed to ensure a more competitive system, centralized coordination, strong institutional management, and quality assessments (Capano, 2011). Increasing pressures have been placed on those working in the sector, with ever-increasing accountabilities based on performance monitoring, managerialism, and marketization, with an emphasis on rankings and competition, efficiencies, and entrepreneurialism focused on income generation (Anderson et al., 2021; Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2019). Further, Thomas and Davies (2002) argue that in the higher education sector, increased pressure is due to the promotion of new forms of masculine subjectivities. Academic life is perceived to be more competitive, ruthless, and single-minded with the pressure to publish and generate income, resulting in a self-protecting, self-serving, less collegial, and more "divide and rule" atmosphere (Thomas & Davies, 2002). For example, Shin and Jung (2014) in a study of 19 higher education systems across the globe, found that increased marketization and neoliberalism in the sector resulted in less job satisfaction, lower quality of working life, and higher levels of job stress. Similarly, other scholars have reported upon the multiple stressors within the higher education sector, such as long working hours, increasing administrative paperwork, the need to work as independent researchers and publish, the lack of support and adequate resourcing, the emphasis on obtaining research funding, and securing time for research, teaching, and associated tasks while the sector has experienced rapid changes, declining resources, and increased performance management and managerialism (Fontinha et al., 2018; Hogan et al., 2014; Neale & White, 2014; Santos, 2016; Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2019). The gendered subtext of higher education is one of competitive masculinity with long working hours, visibility, self-sacrifice, and a lone individual with no other commitments beyond work (Thomas & Davies, 2002). Neoliberalism has resulted in competitiveness, drive, output, and productivity orientation (see Bagillhole & Goode, 2001; Deem, 2009; Doherty & Manfredi, 2006; Thomas & Davies, 2002), and we argue that the competitiveness, drive, output, and productivity orientation of universities in the contemporary context also now extends to equality work, which manifests in an institutional appetite for "peacocking."

1.5 | Equality virtue signaling and "performance gaps"

Virtue signaling is a term that has been enthusiastically embraced in popular culture, as well as in academic research, focusing on the expressions and actions of individuals, and also brands and organizations. Neoliberal universities in the context of hyper-marketization are also actively engaging in virtue signaling (Peterson, 2016). Virtue signaling is the art of posing as admirably virtuous while not actually achieving stated aims (ibid). We argue here that this could also extend to equality and diversity awards and frameworks, such as AS. However, "institutional peacocking" is different from virtue signaling. We contribute the conceptualization of "institutional peacocking" in that we argue AS is not just a signaling of equality but has become an integral part of the politics of documentation (Ahmed, 2007) and the wider university's neoliberal and competitive game (Aula et al., 2015). Critically, Elwick (2020) argues, drawing on an analysis of 77 value statements of English universities, that while university value statements are

“shared by a majority of institutions, there still remains the question of what such published statements are truly for” (2020, p. 586). We position AS as a means of communicating “values” such as gender equality, though critically, it is the tension between what is intended, what is actually achieved, and by whom, as well as who stands to gain, that is evidenced and explored here. In the marketized neoliberal context, gain refers not only to the potentially reputational gains from AS awards, but also, by implication, financial and market value.

1.6 | Burdening of the already burdened

It is well documented that much equality work is conducted by marginalized individuals and groups, with the onus placed upon them to work for progressive change (Parsons & Priola, 2013; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019). This is also the case for AS whereby it is disproportionately women who are AS champions with AS often seen as “women’s work” (Caffrey et al., 2016). It is still the case that gender equality is seen as a “women’s problem” (Liff & Cameron, 1997). An AS application took on average 6–12 months to complete, most champions in this research (who were disproportionately women) reported a burdensome workload for the submission, with Pearce (2017) finding that the work for an AS submission leads to exhaustion. AS applications require considerable burdens of work from self-assessment teams and champions, mostly women, which dramatically increased their workload leading to over-time, night, and weekend work (Caffrey et al., 2016), which is a finding also prevalent in this research. Thus, women’s participation in AS disadvantages their individual career progress (Caffrey et al., 2016) since it creates an opportunity cost for research productivity as measured in terms of performance metrics such as the research excellence framework in the UK. In other words, their career progression, based on research productivity and performance, is negatively affected by the time involved in gender equality work (Britton, 2017; Ovseiko et al., 2017; Wilson, 1991). This is seldom recognized in formal work evaluation processes such as personal development reviews and appraisals or in workload allocation models. The findings suggest that this serves as an additional burden and disadvantage to women and other minority groups who carry out such equality work. In the following section, we discuss how the research was conducted, the findings, discussion, and final conclusion then follow.

2 | METHODOLOGY

The core aim of the study was to explore how AS has been co-opted and mobilized as a vehicle for contemporary neoliberal equality work, how this affects and shapes equality work, and how universities engage in equality virtue signaling, through the voices of AS champions themselves and their lived experiences. Seeking to cast light on AS champions’ perspectives and experiences of carrying out equality work within and for their universities, across the UK, our analysis was primarily and closely driven by and targeted to this objective.

Drawing on our interpretivist philosophical position, we position AS as a socially constructed system that functions and is implemented in diverse institutional and contextual settings. We position such complexity as a frame of reference, mobilizing and adopting a multifaceted approach in order to contribute conceptually as well as empirically to understandings of how champions’ lived experience, agency, and the institutional structures they find themselves within shape the carrying out of contemporary equality and diversity work.

We mobilize a combination of Acker’s inequality regimes (2006) to provide a multi-level theoretical framing to the research and inform facets of analysis, as well as to aid the positioning of the research in the wider academic landscape. Specifically informing the deductive themes, as is discussed in a later section of the paper. An interpretivist approach has enabled in-depth qualitative insights into multifarious experiences of AS champions’ lived experiences, in a range of institutional contexts. While this research focuses on the UK and Irish context, the findings surrounding lived experiences of the practices and processes of AS may be applied in other contexts where the framework is implemented. We acknowledge that there both normative and practical challenges around gender equality work (Clavero & Galligan, 2021) in the quest for epistemic gender equality in higher education.

2.1 | Sampling

The sample was made up of a range of both academic and professional services staff, both in STEMM and non-STEMM roles. We included the classification of discipline as women are less represented in STEMM disciplines (HESA, 2022). At the time of data collection, there were 815 awards across 164 institutions (Advance HE 2020a, 2020b). The research involved stratified sampling of pre- and post-1992 universities, and by institutional and departmental/faculty awards using the publicly available member list on the Advance HE website.

Our purposive sample has two distinct benefits in that it provides a broad geographical spread, as well as including both institutional and departmental level champions, offering wide-ranging insights and experiences, from a range of institutions. In the stratified sample, we also ensured type of institution was represented, that is research and teaching intensive universities. Although, the Russell Group university classification (research intensive universities) does not exist in the Republic of Ireland, the sample consisted of participants from 12 research intensive and 23 teaching-focused institutions. Once the stratified sampling was complete to ensure a representative sample based on geographic location, type of institution, disciplines, and professional and academic roles, we randomly sampled AS champions for the study. There were no other inclusion parameters other than for an individual to be an AS champion.

Participation in interviews was voluntary, confidential, anonymous, and compliant with the ethical standards of the authors' institutions. Originally, we sought to sample 30% of the 164 institutions and thereby conduct approximately 50 interviews; however, as the research was conducted during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which many people (disproportionately women) were home-schooling their children, as a consequence there was attrition during the data collection. Thus, the final sample consisted of 35 participants, 24 of whom self-identified as women and six of whom self-identified as men. Five participants were from Ireland and 30 from the UK, 13 were from STEMM and 22 from non-STEMM disciplines, and 23 participants were academics, and 12 were professional staff.

2.2 | Data collection

All interviews were conducted online, on the Google hangouts or WebEx platform due to COVID-19 restrictions, recorded, and then transcribed verbatim. Interviews were conducted between December 2020 and May 2021, just before the "transformed Athena SWAN" framework was launched in the UK. All participant and institutional identifiers were redacted at the transcription stage to further protect participants.

2.3 | Method of analysis

The aim of the analysis was to explore AS champions' perspectives of the implementation AS as a vehicle for change in the institution and give further voice to their experiences and insights. We explored these empirical insights of how the AS framework is mobilized, and its outcomes in terms of awards communicated by institutions.

Thematic analysis supported the main research aim and enabled a clear categorization of the findings. All findings were coded to an initial coding framework, with deductive themes derived from facets of Acker's inequality regimes (Acker, 2006). Specifically, the bases of inequality, referring to "to enduring and systematic differences in access to and control over resources for provisioning and survival" (2006, p. 444), "Organizing Processes that Produce Inequality" (ibid, 2006, p. 447), and the (re-)production of inequalities through "textually informed practices" (ibid, 2006, p. 447), which we position AS as here, and which also has linkage to Ahmed's politics of documentation (2007); thus, in turn, also connecting the research strategy in itself to feminist theory. Findings were then further

coded to an open coding framework comprising the key sensitizing themes: equality work, rewards for equality work, the impact of AS, incentives for undertaking AS, performance management, managerialism, criticisms, and recommendations. Our approach to analysis was underpinned by Braun and Clarke's (2019) six phases of thematic analysis to further ensure a systematic approach to analysis. All findings were coded and analyzed in NVivo12, and initially coded to initial and then open coding frameworks followed by a connecting strategy (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). This approach allowed for further insights into the relationships between the themes and analytical facets, and the relationship of the codes to the extant literature, and research questions to be explored. Both researchers coded the findings independently, then engaged in code comparisons to explore and discuss alternative interpretations and insights, and to ensure analytical rigor.

Future studies could explore how AS and other equality awards and schemes are embraced in other higher education contexts around the world, and in contexts which are less intensively marketized. Further, there are opportunities for research into other equality schemes (e.g., race), another important yet underexplored area in the extant literature.

2.4 | Ethical considerations

The study gained full ethical approval from the institution of the authors, all identifiers were redacted by the transcriber, and pseudonyms were allocated to further protect participants. The research strictly adhered to the university ethics guidelines, not only because of its timing but also to acknowledge and respect any anxiety associated with the award submission process, and to protect participants from any potential harm and/or identification. Further, because of the time frame during which the research was conducted (during the second COVID-19 lockdown in the UK), we were acutely aware of the importance of flexibility and accommodating the needs of participants, many of whom also had caring responsibilities, as well as in many instances were home-schooling children at the time. We made it clear to participants that this research was being conducted entirely independently of Advance HE. Notably, several participants mentioned that this made them feel more able to speak openly about how AS is being "used" by their institution and the effects on their workloads.

3 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following section is structured around three dominant themes arising from the findings: perceptions of the impact (or lack thereof) of AS; performativity of gender equality work; and perceptions of how AS is used by institutions which contributed to the conceptualization of *institutional peacocking*. We offer here a discussion of the empirical insights into how AS has become part of the managerial culture of competition. Drawing on the voices of 35 AS champions across the UK and Republic of Ireland, we explore how AS is shaping contemporary equality work in the context of the neoliberal university, contributing to performative ways of doing equality work and institutional peacocking.

We posit here, drawing on participants' lived experiences of not only AS, but also of the related practices, processes, and policies that institutional engagement in AS is oftentimes engaged by management because it is seen as something that is required and important for reputational gain, rather than because it is morally the right thing to do. However, this also brings to the fore the epistemic tensions between the intentions behind an institution engaging in AS and actual outcomes in terms of positive, concrete changes in gender equality. It may be argued that if the outcome is positive (in terms of women's representation and the promotion of good practice in promoting gender equality) that the initial intention is irrelevant, and if reputational gains are a by-product, that it is solely the core outcome of improved women's representation (as the core aim) that matters. However, we argue here that not only is the transformational change arising from AS limited, but that institutional engagement with AS is increasingly

driven by a neoliberal audit culture and performance management rhetoric. This not only burdens individual champions who are disproportionately women, women of color, or LGBTQA + people, but that critically, this also brings a performative element to gender equality work in that achievements of AS “need” to be showcased and conceptualized here as “institutional peacocking.”

A manifestation of such peacocking can be demonstrated by the AS award “logo” or award image being used on institutional documents alongside other accreditations; on email signatures; in university brochures; on university websites, as well as in other locations where a university may wish either to virtue signal or indeed, “institutionally peacock” about its gender equality achievements while still, for example, having a sizable gender pay gap or significant levels of vertical gender segregation. The AS logo has been enthusiastically embraced by university marketing departments, another signifier of the not only the commodification of higher education, but also of the outcomes of equalities work, albeit the labor behind gaining AS awards remains often unrewarded in terms of time allocation, resourcing, and recognition. This is presented here as the disconnect between institutional equality kudos, “institutional peacocking,” and those who actually do the day-to-day labor of gaining the AS awards for the institution. Further, throughout the interviews, it was clear that senior management are often perceived to be not engaged nor genuinely caring about the core principles or aims of AS, but rather the thought is more centered on “*having the badge*,” the labels that are seen to be attractive and or simply required to be seen to be an institution of a particular esteem. As such, it is about the award, institutional peacocking, and the subsequent institutional reputational gain, rather than contributing positively to gender equality.

3.1 | Perceptions of the impact (or lack thereof) of Athena SWAN

Contrary to the findings of the 2021 Advance HE report (Advance HE, 2021a), which found that “93% of Champions believe that the Charter has had a positive impact on gender issues in their university, department or research institute” (ibid, 2021a), this research has found that AS champions’ perceptions of how AS contributes to tangible change in terms of gender equality is overwhelmingly neutral, with only few participants believing that AS has a positive impact on gender equality within their department or institution, but rather that AS awards are increasingly used for institutional peacocking about what universities are doing for gender equality. While the sample is considerably smaller than that of the independently conducted 2021 Advance HE report, our findings provide novel, and critically, independent insight into champions’ lived experiences and perceptions of how AS is mobilized and for what purpose (other than the quest for gender equality), many participants were critical as to the impact of AS:

We, we have had, this year we’ve had a complete change of gender profile within our academic leadership, but that’s, that, I cannot say that’s because of Athena SWAN, so we had a completely white male academic leadership team you know from top, top to bottom, and it’s not more, well it’s now more gender diverse and now more ethnically diverse, but I don’t think, I don’t think that’s because of Athena SWAN.

(Participant 26, UK)

Several participants mentioned at the end of interviews (once the recorders had been stopped) that they felt more able to speak openly and candidly about their experiences of AS work because the research was being independently conducted.

It is clear from the findings that there is indeed a “performance paradox” (Frost & Brockmann, 2014; Meyer & Gupta, 1994; Osterloh & Frey, 2020) at play. Performative ways of doing equality work may result in AS, being mobilized as an effective tool for institutional reputation gains and institutional peacocking, rather than driving meaningful change, in short, that the mechanism is hijacked for ulterior motives such as reputational gain:

when I first met the HR director when we said about doing Athena SWAN and she, she turned round and said I like gold and then went like this with her rings, and I thought no that's not what this is about, you know we're not just going to put in for a, for a gold award and stuff like that

(Participant 18, UK)

In turn, oftentimes, AS was referred to in terms of being an “equality assurance process,” rather than a framework through which to positively contribute to gender equality in higher education, a symbol of not only the permeation of neoliberal rhetoric through language, but also of a personification of an audit culture where assurance processes are central, in the context of the “performative university” (Blackmore & Sachs, 2003), and a sector where extolling virtue around equality is also closely linked to a managerial culture of competition, market orientation, ranking and league tables, accountability and performance management in universities, in turn, this also contributes to and drives performative ways of doing gender equality work, and in turn, institutional peacocking.

3.2 | Performativity of gender equality work

A central theme in the findings has been the performative nature and performativity of gender equality work, as an extension of Butler' (2002) notion of gender performativity at the institutional level, conceptualized here as “institutional peacocking” as a vehicle for diversity kudos in the neoliberal context. We argue that AS relies on the goodwill of (already) burdened individuals to work toward institutional and departmental AS awards, and that this is a form of performativity which, referring also to the notion of “corporeal style” (Butler 2002, p. 139) that having an AS award has become an integral facet of institutional level corporeal style, without which, particularly in the neoliberal context, also has (neoliberal) financial implication attached:

...in terms of metrics and performance management like absolutely, you know more and more we're seeing that we need to have Athena SWAN or, or some kind of acknowledgement of our commitment to, to equality and diversity in terms of research funding and, and the such like...

(Participant 27, UK)

Notably, we found that AS work was strongly related to performance management with the findings demonstrating a clustering with AS associated with management, achievement, acknowledgment, and assessment, while performance was associated with expectations, funding, complaints, process, and drawback. Specifically, as the following participants state, that they recognize AS is part of the performative way of doing gender equality:

...there's a reality of, of the sector that it's hard to immediately change as much as I would like to, and within that framework of, of targets, league tables and measurements, in order to achieve universal acceptance of what you're doing there is a, a degree to which we have to follow that, some of those of performatively

(Participant 29, UK)

We assert that AS is now more of a bureaucratic exercise, than a vehicle for real change in what is a deeply inequitable sector, a sector in which women are still subject to vertical gender segregation, discrimination, and unequal pay and career outcomes. A recurring and strongly held view was that AS has become “*another performance measurement instrument*,” which is now an integral part of the suite of metrics by which university's decision-making and accountability processes are driven:

...if everything is very market-driven it, it does favour the research institutions with higher prestige. And you know the, because the pursuit of academic excellence is.... they're, they're so obsessed with it, it, it means that's more important to them than gender equality

(Participant 3, UK)

Nevertheless, this is incongruous with the wider institutional level discourse around gender inequality, whereby anecdotally leaders present AS as something that is being done for moral reasons, rather than because it is now increasingly seen as a "must-have" to demonstrate that the institution is engaged in equality matters or because of "economic rationality which oftentimes ignores or rejects social justice concerns" (Noon, 2007, p. 781). Equality kudos and institutional peacocking go hand-in-hand, in the sense that the kudos that is gained from AS, is then mobilized by institutions, by institutional peacocking, to demonstrate that they are progressive and engaged in the quest for equality.

3.3 | Perceptions of how AS is used by institutions

We argue from the findings of this study that importance of AS awards for the institution reputationally is disproportionate to the efforts and exhaustion of those who work tirelessly to obtain AS awards and contribute to more equitable lived experiences of work in higher education. Throughout the interviews, it was clear that champions felt and perceived incongruence between the aims of AS, their efforts, positive transformational change in terms of gender equality, and how AS awards were communicated and signaled by their institutions:

who benefits from the awards, the institution does you know, the women don't necessarily benefit....

(Participant 15, UK)

Critically, time and again participants identified that AS has become a "tick box exercise" with an emphasis on data collection and measurement, which is in danger of displacing the goal of achieving gender equality:

...you can do Athena SWAN and do very little frankly as long as you've ticked all the boxes and produced a lot of pretty graphs, yeah, and an action plan, and you can run as many seminars as you like, you're not necessarily going to deliver real change...I think that's where it has become this sort of badge process orientated rather than a real forum for change

(Participant 13, UK)

There was a strong sense of linkage between the managerialism associated with AS and performance management, whereby the majority of participants expressed the view that AS is part of a managerial culture of competition, market orientation, ranking and league tables, accountability and performance management, essentially an equality rhetoric that is mobilized to "peacock" institutional virtue:

I think the place where it really made a difference was at faculty level where we have a dean who frankly I think is not remotely concerned with equality and diversity, he'd be very happy if he never had to deal with any E&D stuff at all, but start handing out gongs and setting up a competition between universities and he suddenly you know, he'll buy in for the sake of not wanting to be you know the worst faculty in the country when it comes to Athena SWAN.

(Participant 11 UK)

With another participant clearly expressing the tensions between the moral importance of AS and university “business aims”:

...there'll be some institutions who have the moral high ground and will say this is the right thing to do, but ultimately you know the bottom line is business and its business directed...but it is about business, it's about recruiting the, the best staff, it's about setting us above other competitors.

(Participant 17, UK)

The incentive for universities to apply for an AS award was closely related to funding and institutional reputation, and it is this finding which underpins our conceptualization of the notion of “institutional peacocking.” The oft contested, albeit evident linkage to funding was found to alter behavior and attitudes to equality, though this was framed by participants as “*being mechanistic*.” It is this debate around the root cause for action, which links closely to our core theorization of organizational practices of diversity and whether AS is primarily an additional performative burden for those carrying out equality work and an opportunity for institutional peacocking. The process of AS work and gaining AS awards for the institutions, rather than the goal of achieving institutional gender equality, was a recurrent theme amongst the responses of our participants:

“once you've kind of got that target and you want, and it's something that you want to be able to achieve and get that email that says that you've done it, you are, it is difficult to not, to not, yeah I don't know how to phrase it, it becomes, getting the application done and getting it looking nice and shiny and giving it the best chance of success becomes the goal in itself rather than the changes to what you're actually trying to work on

(Participant 10, UK)

Much like the findings from Ahmed's (2007) work, we find that AS champions “end up doing the document rather than doing the doing” (2007, p. 590), this is not a criticism of champions themselves but rather an indication of institutional foci on awards and the opportunities for peacocking that these present, rather than tangible improvements in gender equality.

Incentives for institutions engaging in AS primarily centered on funding, and the gaining of the actual awards and the “diversity kudos.” A further incentive for applying for an AS award appeared to be institutional or departmental reputational gains with the majority of participants expressing the view that an incentive to gain an AS award as a “required badge” for the institution:

“I think it's a, I think it's a lever, and I think that's where it has become this sort of badge process orientated rather than a real forum or, or you know activist sort of network”

(Participant 7, UK)

Reputational incentives were a dominant theme throughout the interviews with AS champions and participants spoke about the clear linkage between AS awards and institutional reputation.

It was also further noteworthy that there appeared to be an element of fear around “losing” an AS award, albeit participants did not speak about the potential regressions in equality that this may cause but rather, they expressed concern about the reputation of the school or department or the university, the (negative) reputational impact and the concerns of management. While changes in policies may be helpful to an extent, that organizational inequalities such as gender inequality are insidious and further entrenched through the subversion of formal practices and processes, through informal networks (Yarrow, 2021) and gendered micro politics (Morley, 2001, 2003; Yarrow, 2021).

4 | CONCLUSIONS

The implications of the findings of this paper are threefold in that we contribute empirically to understandings of individuals' lived experiences of being AS champions; the way in which institutional level AS awards are being used by universities to demonstrate diversity kudos and reputational gains; and thirdly, we have cast light on the way in which AS has been captured by the neoliberal agenda, capitalist rhetoric, and the marketization of higher education. We found that AS is being captured as a "politics of documentation" (Ahmed, 2007) and "producing inequality" (Acker, 2006) for those already experiencing inequality and being overburdened with AS work, but represents kudos for the institution. Taken together, these three facets contribute to our core argumentation and the novel conceptualization of "institutional peacocking" whereby institutions are "using" AS awards to peacock how equal they are in terms of gender equality for reputational gain as perceived by those carrying out the work, despite universities being bastions of ongoing and deeply entrenched gender inequality. Central to the findings, and contrary to those of Advance HE (2021a, 2021c), we find that rather than driving transformational changes in gender equality, AS serves as a vehicle for institutions to showcase their equality work in the form of AS awards, critically moving beyond virtue signaling, which are then mobilized to "peacock" their "equality credentials" in order to benefit from reputational gain; potentially also serving to further conceal gender inequality, characterized gender pay gaps, and vertical gender segregation.

To conclude, while AS has been a driver for positive change in several institutions, it is also becoming increasingly clear that the values that AS espouses have been captured as a part of the neoliberal agenda in higher education. AS has become a valuable commodity for institutions to peacock that they are doing the "right thing." However, the labor behind the gaining of awards is carried out disproportionately by women, LGBTQA + people, and others who may also disproportionately be burdened by equality work, while institutions profit from their goodwill and efforts to build institutional reputation and income. There is an ongoing disconnect between who conducts the work and the institutions that benefit. Further, our research has highlighted the lived experience of AS champions and the often unseen (and unrewarded) labor behind a process of documentation that benefits the institutions while burdening those carrying out the work, a further burdening of the already burdened.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data for this research will not be made publicly available in any repository, to protect the identity of the participants.

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