

Ten reasons you might not get a Bronze Athena Swan award (and two why you won't get a Silver)

Based on my recent experiences as an Athena Swan panel member, I have drawn up a list of common issues in applications that can lead to awards not being granted. I hope that these might be of use to those preparing new submissions.

1. Ownership by the leaders.

It is important that E&D issues are owned at the highest level in the department. A clear strong statement from the Head is needed, demonstrating personal interest and commitment. The Head of Department should also be a member of the SAT. And please don't forget the basics – the guidelines ask for a statement asserting the correctness of the presented information, so don't omit this!

2. Ownership by the department

There also needs to be clear evidence of ownership throughout the department, both formally (through the balance of representation on the SAT, frequency of its meetings, and formal reporting arrangements) and informally (through descriptions of the departmental culture and any informal arrangements).

3. Ongoing life of SAT

The section describing the future formal plans for the SAT are often weak. Thought needs to be given to succession planning (especially of student representatives), what the constitution of the SAT (or whatever committee it evolves into) becomes, and how this group will implement the action plan, infiltrate all levels of the departmental structure, and provide ongoing oversight of the delivery of the plan.

4. Presentation of data

Data needs to be presented clearly and consistently. This really should not have to be said to academics from numerate disciplines, but some data presentations are shocking. First, get the basics right – if they ask for three years of data, then please provide this. And be consistent – don't choose one three year period for one thing and another period for something else. Make sure graphs and tables are labelled clearly so its obvious what is being shown. Some variety in presentation between diagrams and tables can break up the monotony, as long as this is done clearly. Have someone check for consistency between data – it sometimes happens that the numbers that occur in the written text are not consistent with those in the tables. Make sure you provide benchmark data and use it to provide a context for your departmental issues.

5. Dealing with issues

For each data set presented, ask yourself what is the most obvious thing you can conclude from it. Are the numbers of female students on one programme significantly

smaller than on another? Has the percentage of female professors gone down over the period measured? Is the proportion of women applying for promotion smaller than for men? Whatever you can see, the panel will be able to see, and you need to bring this out in the text.

Having drawn the obvious conclusion from the data, you then need to provide a diagnosis (or at least a hypothesis) as to why this is the case. Perhaps the entry requirements for programmes are different, or one programme can be taken in part-time mode. Perhaps there is no active training provided on how to apply for promotion. And so on.

Finally, having made the observation and diagnosis, propose an action that will (or ought to) address the issue. You won't believe the number of times that proposed actions have almost nothing to do with the issue that is blatantly staring you in the face!

6. Not having evidence

A number of applications include actions to gather further evidence. This could be for one of several reasons:

- there is a particularly strange or inexplicable issue for which there are several conflicting hypotheses, and more data is needed before an appropriate remedy can be proposed.
- The applicants can't think of anything to do, so they just suggest continuing to collect data, despite the fact that the issue is already obvious from existing data.
- The applicants have not done enough preliminary data collection to warrant submitting the application.

The first of these three reasons, if used sparingly and for specific issues would be OK. Unfortunately, you tend to see a lot more of the other two reasons, which are definitely not OK.

7. Weak/vague actions

Actions are supposed to produce measurable results, and over a staged time period of the award. Remember to apply the SMART methodology – the panel will be disappointed if too many of the actions are of the form “Monitor this”, “Try to do that”, “Improve the other”. Also don't just have a bunch of actions to do immediately – you should have a progression that takes you through the period of the award, so you will be in a position to apply for Silver at that point. Weak action plans are often the downfall of proposals.

8. Hiding behind institutional policies

There are a number of sections, such as flexible working and maternity leave cover, where your institution almost certainly has a policy. You should demonstrate how you support, monitor and enact such university-wide policies. However, while this is good in itself, don't hide behind it. Some applications just copy and paste the institution policy and leave it at that! You need to explain explicitly what your department is going to do additionally, and in a way that is sensitive to the issues in your department. The panel knows that institutions have certain legal obligations – don't think these are anything like enough.

9. Using small numbers as an excuse

It is particularly the case in certain disciplines (computer science and some engineering) that the numbers of female staff and students are so low, it makes certain kinds of action very challenging. For example, if you only have 3 female academic staff, it seems unfair to expect them to be on every single committee and appointment panel.

The assessment panel know this. Don't use it as an excuse not to do anything. Try to come up with creative alternative plans. For example, invite people from other departments to help with the gender balance on appointment panels; for each major committee make sure there is one member that explicitly is tasked with raising E&D issues. As long as you are trying to do what you can, in a positive way, the panel will be sympathetic.

10. Forgetting the purpose of application

Bizarrely, towards the end of the application, some applicants seem to forget the purpose of the application. Thus, you can get long discussions of workload allocation models, for example, without any reference whatsoever as to how it impacts on gender equality issues. These sections are there because they describe areas where there is potential to make changes and make a difference – think about how you can do this.

Above all – give yourself time to write the report, sense check it, and go through an internal moderation process before submission. Many of the above issues would be caught if a sensible moderated process was adhered to. Unfortunately, some applications look like they were rushed at the last minute with little or no basic checking and proof-reading. This just wastes everyone's time.

Two reasons you won't get a Silver award

1. Speculative application without solid action plan implementation

Some departments apply for Silver directly, without holding Bronze first. While this is allowed, it is only going to have a chance of working if you have already been implementing a comprehensive action plan explicitly designed to address equality issues. You are unlikely to succeed just because you think your department is pretty good at E&D.

2. Solid action plan but no demonstrable results

Even if you do have a solid action plan (if you do hold Bronze, say) and have been implementing it vigorously for several years, you still won't get Silver unless you can clearly demonstrate, with supporting data, that these actions have led to significant changes. So, for example, if you introduced a mentoring scheme to help prepare women for promotion applications, then you not only need to have been doing this, but the data needs to show that promotion prospects for women have improved as a result. The evidence doesn't have to be quantitative – improved feedback can also provide good evidence of change. Athena Swan is about making a difference – you will only get Silver if you have started to do this, however laudable the actions themselves.