

# Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality

## Recommendations made by the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality

*March 2022*

## Introduction

Chairman, members of the Joint Committee, on behalf of THEA, we appreciate this opportunity to make a submission on the recommendations made by the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality. As requested, we have limited our comments to the recommendations that are most relevant to the work of our organisation and the higher education institutions (HEIs) which we represent.

## Context

Efforts to significantly improve gender equality in Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) have accelerated since 2015. The first transformational tool was the opening of the UK-based Athena SWAN Charter<sup>1</sup> and award process to Irish HEIs, supported by funding from the Higher Education Authority (HEA). From 2015, Irish HEIs began to apply for Athena SWAN awards. At the time of writing, the majority of THEA members hold a Bronze Institutional Award or are reapplying after an initial unsuccessful application, which is a common situation reflecting the significant challenge that securing an Athena SWAN award represents.

Since 2016, two major national reports of gender equality in higher education have been published.<sup>2,3</sup> After the 2016 report, HEIs were required to implement Gender Action Plans and report on these regularly to the HEA. The HEA also began to publish annual reports of gender-disaggregated staff data from Irish HEIs.<sup>4</sup> Following the 2018 report, all HEIs have adopted a flexible cascade model in recruitment/ promotion, "whereby the proportion of men and women to be recruited or promoted to a certain level is based on the proportion of each at the career level directly below". The 2018 report also established a Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality within the HEA<sup>5</sup> (now Centre of Excellence for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) and a "women-only Professorship" scheme, the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative.<sup>6</sup> A third national equality review in higher education will take place during 2022.<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, the focus has shifted from solely gender equality to a broader equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) agenda, based on the nine grounds of discrimination in equality legislation.<sup>8</sup> The commitment of THEA's members to EDI was enshrined in the THEA Gender & Diversity Statement (2018).<sup>9</sup> Gender equality plans in HEIs have become EDI plans, taking into account other EDI areas both separately and as they intersect with gender equality.

A major development in recent years has been the implementation of the Framework for Consent in Higher Education Institutions.<sup>10</sup> In March 2021, THEA published the report of the THEA PROPEL (Promoting Consent and Preventing Sexual Violence) project.<sup>11</sup> The report made a series of recommendations, including a number of resources which should be established within HEIs to support the implementation of the Framework, and work is ongoing to put in place these resources. A budget request to support this work within higher education

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/international-charters/athena-swan-ireland>

<sup>2</sup> HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institution (2016)  
[https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/04/hea\\_review\\_of\\_gender\\_equality\\_in\\_irish\\_higher\\_education.pdf](https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/04/hea_review_of_gender_equality_in_irish_higher_education.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Accelerating Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions – Gender Action Plan 2018-2020 (2018)  
<https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/11/Gender-Equality-Taskforce-Action-Plan-2018-2020.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://hea.ie/policy/gender/statistics/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://hea.ie/policy/gender/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://hea.ie/policy/gender/senior-academic-leadership-initiative/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://hea.ie/2022/03/15/minister-harris-announces-review-of-gender-equality-in-higher-education/>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/equality\\_in\\_work/equality\\_in\\_the\\_workplace.html](https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/equality_in_work/equality_in_the_workplace.html)

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.thea.ie/contentFiles/THEA\\_Equality\\_Statement\\_2018.pdf](http://www.thea.ie/contentFiles/THEA_Equality_Statement_2018.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> "Safe, Respectful, Supportive and Positive – Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Irish Higher Education Institutions" (2019)  
<https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/framework-for-consent-in-higher-education-institutions.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.thea.ie/contentFiles/PROPEL.pdf>

was recently submitted to Minister Harris, at his request. Higher education has the potential to be an exemplar in this area, although it is evident that education on consent must begin at an early age.

### Comment on the Recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality

*Recommendation 21. Improve gender balance on boards by:*

*(a) Making funding to public bodies contingent on reaching a 40% gender balance quota by 2025.*

The 2016 National Review of Gender Equality in HE<sup>2</sup> recommended that key decision-making bodies in HEIs should include a minimum 40% representation of each gender (female/ male). The HEA's 2021 gender statistics report<sup>12</sup> showed that within the technological higher education sector, as of December 2020, this 40% minimum was achieved on Governing Bodies in 9 out of 11 institutions, on Academic Councils at 11 out of 11 institutions, and at Executive Management level in 5 out of 11 institutions. The ongoing process of institutional mergers and designation as technological universities should provide the opportunity to improve gender equality at Executive Management level.

*Recommendation 25. Work places should be required to develop, resource, implement and monitor gender-neutral recruitment and promotion policies and practices including:*

*(a) Specific policies to promote gender equality in leadership positions.*

*(b) A requirement to operate gender-sensitive and anti-discriminatory selection and promotions processes.*

*(c) Equal access to training, assignments and mentoring opportunities for all employees including part-time and remote workers.*

The 2018 Gender Taskforce report<sup>3</sup> (page 13) put forward a set of positive action recommendations to improve gender balance among senior academic and professional/ managerial/ support (PMS) staff. These include setting targets for promotion and recruitment of academic staff and senior grades of professional, management and support staff, plus the use of a flexible cascade model "whereby the proportion of men and women to be recruited or promoted to a certain level is based on the proportion of each at the career level directly below". This appears to have resulted in some small improvements in gender balance in leadership positions: between September 2015 and December 2020, the percentage of female Senior Lecturers (the highest academic grade in the sector) increased from 31% to 36%, while the percentage of female PMS staff at the highest grades increased from 14% to 25%.<sup>12,13</sup> More needs to be done to achieve gender balance in leadership roles: the 2022 national gender equality in HE review may identify further positive actions which could be taken to accelerate change. There is a particular challenge around the availability of leadership roles for staff, as appointments to these roles are generally made on a permanent basis, so vacancies only arise when staff retire or leave. This includes academic leadership appointments such as Head of School. An ongoing review for DFHERIS of academic employment conditions within the sector may result in changes which could see academic leadership positions rotated every three to five years, as they are in the traditional universities, and which offers the opportunity to improve gender balance. However, a dearth of leadership opportunities for PMS staff - linked to the relatively low numbers of PMS staff in the sector - will remain and will not be resolved without the provision of funding for additional posts. In practice, all employees have equal access to training, assignments and mentoring opportunities.

Following the 2018 Report,<sup>3</sup> the HEA established a "women-only Professorship" scheme, the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative. HEIs can compete for funding to establish "new and additional senior academic leadership posts in areas where: there is clear evidence of significant gender under-representation; where this appointment will have significant impact within the HEI and the relevant faculty/department/functional unit; where they would be a proportionate and effective means to achieve

<sup>12</sup> <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/07/Key-Facts-Figures-Higher-Education-Data-by-Gender-2021.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/Key-Facts-Figures-Higher-Education-Data-by-Gender.pdf>

accelerated and sustainable change within an institution.”<sup>6</sup> Calls for SALI funding were run in 2019 and 2020. However, the bulk of the funding in those Calls was allocated to traditional universities, with only a small number of posts allocated to institutes of technology (IOTs) and technological universities (TUs). This is mostly linked to the substantial differences in senior academic leadership roles in the two HE sectors: the IOTs and TUs do not have a professor grade, rather, the most senior academic grade (Senior Lecturer 3) is an academic management grade (Head of School). So the IOTs/TUs and the universities are not competing in this Call on a “like for like” basis. It is simpler for a university to create a new Professorship than for an IOT or TU to create an new academic management role. This hampers the ability of IOTs/TUs to put forward viable applications for SALI funding.

*Recommendation 27. Curriculum review and development should:*

*(a) Promote gender equality and diversity.*

*(b) Explicitly cover gender power dynamics, consent and domestic, sexual and gender-based violence – both online and offline – within the revised Relationships and Sexuality curriculum.*

Ireland’s higher education student population is increasingly diverse, with students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, ethnic minorities, varied cultural backgrounds, disabilities, LGBTI+ students, and mature students. Higher education will need to put significant efforts into co-creating (with students) an inclusive learning environment, celebrating diversity and ensuring that the curriculum and the teaching strategies are inclusive. To achieve this, academic staff will need appropriate training and support; we suggest that the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning could take a leading role in providing same, including by liaising with international colleagues with relevant expertise.

As part of implementing the results of THEA PROPEL,<sup>11</sup> all THEA members are providing dedicated training on sexual violence and harassment to students and staff. This includes training developed by the Active Consent programme,<sup>14</sup> the Bystander Intervention programme,<sup>15</sup> and offered by local Rape Crisis Centres. A proposal for funding to support and expand the training offered in these institutions was submitted to Minister Harris in February 2022. Although it is positive that higher education is offering this training, it potentially comes too late for many young people; age-appropriate training on consent should be offered as early as possible in the education system.

*Recommendation 28. All levels of the education system from pre-school to third level, led by the relevant Government Department, should:*

*(a) Ensure that initial education and continuing professional development for staff includes modules promoting gender awareness and gender-sensitive teaching methods.*

*(b) Monitor policies and practices – including school inspection and whole school evaluation – through the lens of gender equality and report regularly on trends and outcomes by gender.*

During 2021, THEA members began to roll out the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education online training programme. This was developed by a group of HEIs and was supported with funding from the HEA’s Athena SWAN capacity-building fund. The training is for staff and includes four modules: 1) Introduction to Equality, Diversity & Inclusion; 2) Recruitment & Selection; 3) Meeting the Needs of Diverse Students in Teaching & Learning Settings; 4) Putting Policy into Practice. It is being incorporated into induction training for new staff and will be rolled-out to existing staff.

Since the 2016 gender report, HEIs are required to implement Gender Action Plans (GAP) and report on these annually to the HEA. As part of these plans, HEIs are revising policies and practices through the lens of gender equality and EDI. Examples of changes that have been made at one THEA member include:

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.consenthub.ie/who-we-are/training-opportunities/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.ucc.ie/en/bystander/>

- Changing staff recruitment procedures to require that shortlisting is carried out by at least one female and one male, and that interview panels must have a minimum of 40% female members;
- Review of all marketing materials and prospectuses to ensure that they are inclusive;
- Removal of a previous requirement to have one year's service before they could avail of parental leave, which was identified by new employees as a barrier to work/ life balance in their first year of service.

Since 2016, HEIs are also required to send gender-disaggregated staff data (male/ female) to the HEA (gender disaggregated student data has been the norm for many years), which publishes an annual report on the data. The challenge now is to support collection of staff data in other diversity areas, e.g., ethnicity, which is not commonly collected for staff and will require changes to HR policies, practice and IT systems.

*Recommendation 29. In view of the gendered impact on women, reform the Third Level Grants Scheme to ensure that those accessing part-time courses are eligible to apply for a grant.*

The current eligibility requirements for the SUSI student grant are limited to students enrolled on approved undergraduate programmes which must be: provided by an educational institution that provides higher education and training and which is in receipt of recurrent grants from public funds; AND be a full-time course of at least two years' duration; AND lead to a major education and training award, in line with the National Framework of Qualifications<sup>16</sup> or equivalent.<sup>17</sup> At the time of writing, the report into the review of the student grant scheme (undertaken in 2021) has not yet been published. It is unclear the extent to which support for part-time students has been addressed in its recommendations.

In the 2020-2021 academic year, 25% of students enrolled<sup>18</sup> in THEA members were registered as part-time, and 52.5% of those part-time students were female. THEA is particularly aware of the deficits in current supports and strongly endorses this recommendation. It is also worth noting that asylum seekers cannot avail of SUSI support (or the Free Fees Initiative).

*Recommendation 30. Provide appropriate State funding and resources for:*

*(a) Strengthening existing programmes to encourage women into male-dominated careers (e.g. STEM, Science Technology Engineering and Maths) and including apprenticeships.*

*(b) Developing initiatives to encourage men into female-dominated careers (e.g. caring professions)*

There has been significant investment in programmes to encourage women into male-dominated career areas, with much positive work led and supported by Science Foundation Ireland (SFI).<sup>19</sup> THEA members compete successfully each year for SFI Discover Programme funding to support STEM public engagement activities and participate in national activities such as Science Week and SciFest.<sup>20</sup> They also collaborate on initiatives and events with bodies such as Engineers Ireland and the Institute of Physics. The expansion of STEM to STEAM, where the Arts is incorporated into STEM, might provide an opportunity to attract more women into these career areas. To the best of our knowledge, less has been done to encourage men into female-dominated careers.

In addition to programmes and initiatives to encourage women into male-dominated careers, more should be done to reform the curriculum from primary school level onwards to correct for the underlying factors which discourage women from being interested in STEM areas. Research undertaken within higher education can contribute to this. For example, research has indicated that there may be a link between

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<sup>16</sup> [www.nfq.ie](http://www.nfq.ie)

<sup>17</sup> [gov.ie](http://gov.ie) - Public Consultation on Review of Student Grant Scheme - SUSI ([www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie))

<sup>18</sup> <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/enrolments/key-facts-figures-2020-2021/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.sfi.ie/engagement/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://scifest.ie/>

reduced spatial ability in females and their aptitude in STEM subjects,<sup>21</sup> which can be addressed using educational interventions.

*Recommendation 33. The Gender Pay Gap Information Bill should be enacted and implemented without delay. The law should include penalties for non-compliance and an obligation for annual reporting.*

HEIs periodically report pay details broken down by gender to the HEA. The use of approved salary scales in THEA members means that there should be no significant gender pay gap for staff in the same employment grade. Salary increments continued to be paid to staff during, e.g., maternity and caring leave, but not during career breaks - this is a potentially gendered issue which needs to be examined in collaboration with the social partners. Any overall gender pay gap within institutions is due to the lower numbers of women employed in senior grades - please refer to response to Recommendation 25 for details.

*Recommendation 36. Introduce a statutory right to reasonable access to flexible working.*

THEA members are bound to operate Government Circulars that pertain to flexible working, e.g., work-sharing. As part of Athena SWAN work and implementing Gender Action Plans, institutions are, where possible, going beyond what is required, e.g., introducing core business hours for meetings to facilitate staff with childcare responsibilities. The HEIs are currently awaiting guidelines from DPER on remote working, and will implement them when they are available.

*Recommendation 38. Eliminate tolerance in our society of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence by developing and implementing awareness, prevention and education campaigns which may include children of an appropriate age on:*

*(a) The impact and harm caused by domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.*

*(b) Supports available to victims/survivors.*

*Recommendation 39. Support justice for victims/survivors by: (d) Providing specialised confidential health care and other support services for victims/survivors including legal representation.*

As mentioned above, in March 2021 THEA published the report of the THEA PROPEL (Promoting Consent and Preventing Sexual Violence) project,<sup>11</sup> which was designed to help THEA's members to implement the requirements set out in the Framework for Consent in Higher Education Institutions. The project report provided guidance for the institutions in, for example, developing Action Plans, creating appropriate policies and procedures including for addressing and managing allegations of sexual misconduct (including sexual violence and harassment), putting in place appropriate training for staff and students, and resourcing trauma-informed supports for victims of sexual violence and harassment, including enhanced counselling services. These actions are currently ongoing in the institutions.

As noted above (see response to Recommendation 27), much progress has been made in providing appropriate training in consent and sexual violence and harassment. Establishing policies and procedures has been more challenging, requiring specialist advice on the legal responsibilities of the institution particularly as some instances of sexual misconduct may constitute a criminal offence. Communication campaigns such as the #UnmuteConsent campaign<sup>22</sup> are ongoing nationally and within individual institutions. The HEA has funded the roll-out of the "Speak Out" anonymous reporting and support tool in all HEIs, which allows students, staff and visitors to HE campuses to anonymously report bullying, harassment or sexual misconduct and receive information on the local supports available to them.<sup>23</sup> The "Speak Out" tool should also be an important source of data on instances of bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct occurring

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<sup>21</sup> For an example, see [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308904982\\_National\\_Spatial\\_Skills\\_Report\\_-\\_Phase\\_1\\_Preliminary\\_Findings](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308904982_National_Spatial_Skills_Report_-_Phase_1_Preliminary_Findings)

<sup>22</sup> <https://hea.ie/policy/policy-development/unmuteconsent/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.pchei.ie/minister-harris-launches-speak-out-an-online-and-anonymous-tool-for-students-and-staff-to-report-violence-and-sexual-harassment>

within HEIs, and will inform future policy decisions in this area. HEIs are required to report annually to the HEA on the implementation of their Consent Action Plans, which helps with encouraging continual progress.

*Recommendation 43. Ensure data gathering on key gender equality issues (including care), regular publication of such data and remedial action where necessary.*

*Recommendation 45. Anti-discrimination and equality legislation should be:*

*(b) A standard part of employee training.*

Please refer to responses to Recommendations 28 and 38.

## Conclusion

Overall, much progress has been made in supporting improved gender equality (and the broader EDI agenda) in higher education over a relatively short time (since the mid-2010s), particularly in respect of recruitment and promotion. Participation in Athena SWAN has been a strong driver of this progress, as have the recommendations within the two national gender reports. However, as noted above in the responses to the individual Recommendations, much remains to be done to accelerate progress, embed improvements and spread the lessons learned across the wider public service.

A summary of our main recommendations is provided below.

- HEIs should continue progress made in ensuring that their key decision-making bodies include a minimum 40% representation of each gender (female/ male).
- HEIs should continue work to achieve gender balance in leadership roles, including implementing any relevant recommendations arising from the upcoming national review of gender equality in higher education. While the focus of this work tends to be on academic leadership roles, achieving gender balance in PMS leadership roles is potentially more challenging.
- Technological universities should take advantage of any proposed changes to academic employment conditions to amend the constructs which are a barrier to achieving gender balance. Achieving these changes will require additional State Funding.
- HEIs should reach agreement with social partners to facilitate the payment of salary increments during career breaks, which would help to reducing any gender pay gap for staff employed on the same grade.
- HEIs should seek opportunities to create an inclusive learning environment, celebrating diversity and ensuring that the curriculum and the teaching strategies are inclusive. Appropriate training will need to be provided in order to achieve this.
- HEIs should continue to develop flexible working offerings for staff, including remote working in line with forthcoming DPER guidelines.
- The SUSI Grant system should be reformed to provide support for part-time students.
- HEIs should be financially supported to continue the implementation of the recommendations in the Framework for Consent. Age-appropriate training on consent should be provided for children from as early as possible within the education system.
- More work to encourage men into female-dominated careers is required, and the work to encourage women into male-dominated careers should be complemented reforming the curriculum from primary school level onwards to address underlying factors that discourage women from being interested in STEM.