

Gender Mainstreaming and Athena SWAN

Video Transcript

Welcome to the first of a series of talks on gender equality we are developing in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, showcasing and sharing our expertise in equality and diversity and talking about how we can draw on this within our own departments and schools to support our Athena Swan activities, improving the working and learning environment for staff and students.

I'm Professor Fiona Beveridge, Pro Vice Chancellor for the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. I'm an academic lawyer by background with considerable expertise in gender mainstreaming, and I would like to share some thoughts about how we can draw on the concepts and theories of gender mainstreaming in our own University context.

Gender mainstreaming is the idea that tackling inequality is not a discreet or separate activity but one which has to be integrated by political actors and policy makers into all their activities. It's an idea that originated in development studies which recognised the importance of a gender lens to be effective in tackling poverty and development challenges in the least developed countries. In the 1980s and 90s the idea of gender mainstreaming took hold much more widely, including through the UN's Beijing Platform for Action, so that by the Millennium almost all international organisations and national governments had some kinds of gender mainstreaming initiatives in place.

A well-established definition from the Council of Europe defines Gender Mainstreaming as 'the (re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels at all stages, by the actors involved in policy-making.'

This probably doesn't sound like rocket science now but let's remember that through history - from Votes for Women, through Equal Pay and Equal Treatment legislation and more recently through a focus on harassment and bullying, questions of equality often have been addressed as a distinct topics, with the implication that if you can somehow address that problem, the wider issue will be solved. But it's long been recognised by feminist activists and academics that gender inequality is structural, endemic and constantly reproduced in all social relations - if you tackle one manifestation of gender equality, it will reassert itself in other ways. Gender mainstreaming builds on this knowledge to recognise that inequality needs to be tackled throughout all areas of society.

So what can we learn from academic work on gender mainstreaming?

Most early studies, including my own work, focussed on addressing gender in policy-making, rather than within organisations closer to home such as Universities. With colleagues, I carried out studies looking at how gender mainstreaming was taken forward in a range of European countries, in the different nations within the UK, in international organisations concerned with international trade and development, and not least in the EU, which has been particularly influential in shaping the UK context for gender equality policy over the last five decades. Thinking now about what we learned which might help as we try to tackle persistent gender equality within Universities, two sets of findings stand out.

First, we recognised important differences in approach between different bodies, which veered from highly bureaucratic and expert-driven approaches at one end, to more open, democratic, participative styles at the other. Scrutinising and unpacking these two types of

approach enabled us to identify the relative strengths and weaknesses of each and, importantly, to think about how both could contribute to making gender initiatives effective. This is something I think we can transfer into the University: we need to fix our processes and routines, and draw on expertise to help us analyse our performance, identify good practice, and monitor progress (the expert-bureaucratic approach) but we also need an open and engaging process through which many staff can contribute their views to help us to identify what the barriers are and what changes are required and, through a deliberative process, secure the required cultural changes throughout the University (the democratic-participative approach).

The second set of findings which I find it useful to refer to are the (various) lists which different organisations have developed of essential ingredients for successful gender mainstreaming. These lists primarily reinforce the need for a holistic approach, bringing together different types of support and resource from across (and up and down) an organisation.

While these lists often reflect the organisation and context in which they were developed, they will typically include: the need for high level support or commitment, to give the work visibility and authority; the need for expertise and training the need for adequate resource the need for good engagement and communication with all the relevant stakeholders, again linked to the visibility point; and the need for good monitoring and review processes

Again, this might not sound like rocket science but it should be appreciated that we are emerging from a long period of history where addressing inequality in political organisations, and in the workplace, was often seen as a compliance task - a question of avoiding unlawful discrimination- and hence the preserve in organisations like Universities largely of Managers and HR departments. So these checklists form useful reminders that wide support, commitment and engagement is key to success and we have to create the conditions where the different contributions we seek can be secured.

Athena Swan brings much of this to bear within Universities and, as such, is a demanding process where awards are dependent on real progress and commitment being demonstrated. Each School's Athena Swan journey will be different, since action plans and applications must reflect the barriers identified through enquiry on the ground, not some off-the-peg analysis and off-the-peg solution.

We have a rich pool of expertise and know-how on gender equality across the Faculty to draw on and in this series of podcasts we aim to introduce you to some of those people. Please contact the Faculty Office for more information or to offer to participate.