

GAP Institutional Engagement Exercise

Background

1. In 2018, SFC conducted an Institutional Engagement Exercise consisting of a self-completion survey and in-depth meetings with a sample of colleges and universities. The purpose of the exercise was to scope the current application and implementation of the Gender Action Plan in colleges and universities, and to gather in-depth feedback from institutions, practitioners and sector bodies.

Survey: Overview

2. **Aims and Scope:** As set out in the GAP Annual Progress Report 2017 forward plan, SFC conducted a survey to gather perspectives on institutional progress toward developing and implementing their institutional Gender Action Plans. The survey aimed to examine what progress was being made, and what support is required from SFC. Our aim was to use responses to the survey to help guide us in our future support for the sector, and to ensure that this support is as relevant and effective as possible. We invited both institutional and individual responses to the survey, and also asked members of the Gender Governance Group additional questions about the effectiveness of this group.
3. **Responses:** The survey was conducted in January 2018. Twenty-four responses in total were received to the survey, comprised of:
 - 3 responses from Gender Governance Group members.
 - 3 individual responses.
 - 10 responses on behalf of colleges.
 - 8 responses on behalf of universities.

Survey: Key findings

4. Most institutions state that whilst their institution was already doing activities to address gender imbalance, the development of SFC's gender action plan and institutional GAPs provided renewed focus, enhanced awareness and greater strategic oversight. Many institutions found it helpful in providing a framework and holistic view of work in this area, helping to draw different strands of work in the area together. For example:

“Before publication of GAP there was a wealth of evidence that action was being taken but initiatives were comparatively disparate – we now have an opportunity to bring everything together which is hoped to bring increased focus on achieving our goals”

5. The key findings from the survey included:

The need for SFC to:

- Continue and do more to support a national systemic approach.
- Continue to hold events to share effective practice and facilitate discussions.
- Clarify consequences if institutions don't meet targets.

More generally, the need to:

- Recognise the scarce resource/funding institutions are dedicating to this agenda.
 - Better recognise the link between GAP and other policies – there is a need to better consider tensions between different agendas (eg lack of qualified people in childcare, people from deprived areas, Developing the Young Workforce) and how reporting on different areas can be streamlined to avoid duplication (eg Equality Outcomes, Outcome Agreement, Athena Swan reporting).
 - Enhance the sector's intersectional approach
 - Continue (and potentially extend) the GAP's long term commitment and focus to achieve its outcomes.
 - Undertake a longitudinal survey on the impact of different approaches.
 - Better support those whose gender identity is outside of the male/female binary.
 - Enhance partnership working between institutions and other stakeholders (eg schools, local authorities). Despite efforts so far, there is still a need for a wider coordinated response to the agenda.
 - Raise awareness at a national level to address cultural/societal stereotypes.
6. In addition to individuals and institutions being asked to respond to the survey, members of the gender governance group were asked about the effectiveness of the group. The responses indicated that while the group had worked well for the development and introduction of the plan, there was now a need for it to work in a more focused way for it to achieve its remit. It was suggested that priorities for the group should be shaped by feedback from the sector.

Conversations: Overview

7. As part of the Institution Engagement Exercise, SFC instigated a series of in-depth 'engaged conversations' with a sample of colleges and universities on their institutional Gender Action Plans (iGAPs). The aim of this exercise was to gain insight into the development, implementation and ongoing progress of iGAPs, and to gather perspectives on the strategic and practical application of the SFC GAP at institutional and subject levels.

8. The engaged conversations were conducted by Dr Matson Lawrence, Senior Policy / Analysis Officer with responsibility for implementation of the GAP, and SFC Outcome Agreement Managers for each of the institutions involved. Each university meeting was attended by Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) practitioners, strategic planners, and (where possible) student representatives. The college meetings were attended by EDI practitioners, senior managers and a Regional Board Chair.
9. SFC facilitated in-depth engaged conversations with a sample of six institutions – three colleges and three universities. The institutions involved will remain anonymous. Meetings were conducted between July and September 2018. Due to limitations on SFC staff capacity and the strategic imperative of a range of policy areas in addition to the GAP, meetings were only held with a small sample of institutions in AY2017/18.

Conversations: Key findings

10. **iGAPs:** Conversations indicated that the requirement for institutions to develop iGAPs was positive, as it increased momentum and accountability through the identification and development of aims on a local level.
11. Many universities hold – or are working towards holding – Athena SWAN Awards at institutional and/or departmental levels, which often pre-dates the Gender Action Plan. When institutions were asked to develop an institutional Gender Action Plan (iGAP) these were sometimes largely drawn or adapted from an Athena SWAN action plan and award submission documentation, alongside their Equality Outcomes and related initiatives or programmes (such as Advance HE's Attracting Diversity). This was particularly the case for universities, due to Athena SWAN. SFC should consider how to ensure better alignment between the two and avoid duplication of effort.
12. **Subject-based targets:** The extent to which those developing iGAPs engaged with relevant Faculties and Departments varied significantly.
13. **Staff capacity:** Staff capacity emerged in many conversations as a significant barrier to advancing the aims of the Gender Action Plan. Practitioners in equality and diversity, and in strategic planning, indicated that institutions were inadequately resourcing the GAP and wider equalities work. Practitioners reflected that due to lack of staff capacity, their roles were mainly comprised of undertaking reporting and meeting statutory obligations, with inadequate capacity for advancing equalities across the institution and supporting mainstreaming activities.
14. **'Whole-institution' approaches:** The drawback of this approach, as also identified in the context of criticisms toward Athena SWAN, is that in practice it often relies on work to be undertaken by staff in individual faculties – and that

these staff tend to be women and / or from marginalised groups – whose workload allocations are not adjusted to accommodate this, thus reducing the time available for other work including research and publishing. There was a need therefore to share the workload across an institution.

15. **Contextualising within existing equality, diversity and access policies and initiatives:** One university felt that the GAP promoted ‘movement in the opposite direction to mainstreaming legislation’, stating that it ‘did not quite fit with the direction of travel’.
16. Some institutions shared concerns that there were inherent tensions between the GAP targets and COWA / Widening Access targets. These generally related to apprehensions that by focusing on one specific gender cohort via the GAP gender-specific targets, efforts to widen access and participation (and related targets) may be adversely affected. For example, for women into STEM or men into teaching, institutions expressed concern that these efforts may supersede efforts to widen access for working class men into STEM or working class women into teaching. These conversations spoke to the need for alignment and partnership working between those responsible for the GAP and those responsible for widening access in each institution, to collaboratively explore methods and approaches.
17. **Reporting on subject-based progress:** The conversations indicated a need for SFC to consider the longer-term plans for reporting on progress against the GAP targets, such as via the Outcome Agreement Process, to ensure oversight of the identified subjects in each institution and to measure progress toward the 2030 vision.
18. **Gender diversity:** Institutions were keen to advance their work with respect to supporting trans, non-binary and gender diverse students and staff.

Next steps

19. SFC’s priorities for action are set out in our [progress report](#) for 2018 one of which is to assess our overall approach and the efficacy of the GAP so far. We will work with the Gender Governance Group to consider how best to address the issues highlighted through this exercise in the future implementation of the GAP.