Gender Action Plan: the way forward

Purpose

1. This paper outlines the themes and challenges emerging from the implementation of the gender action plan so far.

Background

2. SFC published the second annual progress report on the GAP in February 2019. In it we stated one of our key priorities for the coming year was ‘Assessing our overall approach and the efficacy of the GAP so far’. This meeting is a first step in doing this. This paper sets out some of the evidence generated in 2018 and asks the group to consider how we might best address the challenges and themes emerging from this evidence base as well as how we can continue to develop this evidence base.

The evidence base

3. In 2018 SFC engaged with the sector 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. It comprised of a survey open to all and in depth discussions with 6 institutions.

Survey findings

4. 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.

5. Most institutions stated 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”.

6. 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.

7. 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

Institutional conversations

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 these conversations with six institutions – three colleges and three universities.

The key findings were:

10. **Institutional Gender Action Plans (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 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. Institutions suggested SFC should consider how to ensure better alignment between the two and avoid duplication of effort. In particular it would be worth highlighting that whilst alignment of all gender focused work is expected and useful, there are particular aims of each initiative (i.e. Athena SWAN primarily focuses on staff while GAPs primarily focus on students) which means simply cutting and pasting content is not productive.

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. **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.

16. **Gender diversity:** Institutions were keen to advance their work with respect to supporting trans, non-binary and gender diverse students and staff.

17. **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’.

18. 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.

**Discussion point 1: Members are asked to reflect on the feedback from SFC’s engagement with the sector as outlined above and invited to offer any other substantial issues they feel are not included.**

19. Following on from these discussions and the broader work we conducted in 2018, SFC published the second annual progress report on the GAP in February 2019. In it we outlined the following priorities for the year:

- Pushing for clearer and more focused outcomes from all institutions through Outcome Agreements, including a more detailed analysis of success rates and retention rates by institution by subject.
- Building the evidence base for effective action through more in depth discussions with institutions, and developing an evaluation framework.
• Sharing good practice where we find it.
• Working with individual institutions on retention and success rates.
• Continuing our focus on Gender Based Violence.
• Action to improve the gender balance of Boards (largely through our funding for Advance HE).
• Assessing our overall approach and the efficacy of the GAP so far, specifically working to ensure join up between different initiatives and policies.

Discussion point 2: How should these actions be taken forward most effectively across the sector?

Strategic coordination

20. In the survey, the institutional visits and broader engagements with the sector, a frequently raised issue has been the following perceived tensions:

• The gender action plan’s focus on one protected characteristic compared to equalities legislation which defines and covers nine protected characteristics (see paragraph 17 and 18)

• The lack of join up across widening access and equality initiatives (see paragraphs 7 and 18 of this paper)

• The lack of coordination in reporting requirements across the Public Sector Equality Duties, Athena Swan, Outcome Agreements and the gender action plan (see paragraphs 7, 11, 13 and 14).

21. On the back of this, we outlined in our annual report that one of the key actions for this year would be ‘to ensure join up between different initiatives and policies’. Firstly, we would like to clarify what the exact issues are. How much is around contradictory objectives as opposed to contradictory and/or multiple reporting requirements? Secondly, we would ask the group’s advice on how to resolve them.

Discussion point 3: the group is asked to consider what the reality and specifics are of these tensions, as opposed to perception, and how best to resolve them?

Developing our evidence base

22. We have developed our evidence base for what is/is not working at a sectoral and institutional level throughout 2018. In 2019 one of our key actions is to ‘build the evidence base for effective action through more in depth discussions with institutions, and developing an evaluation framework’. We would like to
continue building this base with a view to reviewing our approach and making changes where required.

23. Throughout conversations at the meeting, members are asked to reflect on how we can enhance our evidence base. One of the mechanisms we have is the institutional visits established in 2018. The feedback from these was that institutions valued the opportunity to meet. SFC however struggled with capacity to have that many.

24. Our evidence base is also largely so far anecdotal and subjective. In order to truly make change, we need to develop an approach to measuring what works and once this has been assessed, sharing good practice.

Discussion point 4: The group is asked to consider how we should develop our evidence base. As part of this, we would like the group to consider whether members of the group, supported by an SFC policy officer and the relevant Outcome Agreement Manager, could lead institutional discussions?

Next steps

25. At the meeting, following a discussion of point 1 around the table, members will be invited to consider discussion points 2-4 above within small groups, identifying what SFC needs to do, what partners should do and which partners should lead.

26. The overall question we are seeking to answer is:

   How can we progress the aims of the Gender Action Plan and secure the pace of change required to deliver it?

27. Following the meeting SFC will produce a more detailed plan for the coming year of what activities will take place, how members of the GGG and other partners will be involved and how the group as a whole will oversee activity.

Further information

28. Contact: Rachel Adamson, Senior Policy/Analysis Officer or Fiona Burns, Assistant Director, radamson@sfc.ac.uk or fburns@sfc.ac.uk