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The impact of Athena Swan on the gendered subcultural spaces in the UK academia: A case study on Athena Swan gold awarded department

Key Words

workplace, Athena Swan, gender equality and diversity policies/ practices, subcultures, performative spaces

Abstract

Previous research reports the continuous effort of UK universities from the early 80s to challenge women's underrepresentation in senior academic positions through structural and cultural interventions (Phipps, 2008). The Athena Swan (AS) charter was established in 2005 to support the gender equality initiatives of the participating institutions by providing them with a framework to implement equality and diversity practices. Despite such initiatives, gender scholars investigating the issues in academics criticise the scholarship has yet to understand the challenges of women in different career stages (Avolio, 2020). This research addresses this gap by investigating the impact of the AS towards improving the lived experiences of women at their early and mid-career researcher stages in an Athena Swan gold-awarded department.

Theoretical base

This research uses grounded theory approach to investigate the impact of Athena Swan accreditation on the everyday working life of women in the UK academic workplaces. The findings of this research connect the subcultural theory to performative spaces in organisations.

Research purpose

This research used a grounded theory approach to investigate the impact of Athena Swan's gender equality charter on the lived experiences of women academics in the UK Science subject areas. For this purpose, a single case study design was implemented, selecting an Athena Swan Science department which holds a gold award for its 'excellence' in gender equality policies and practices. This study used semi-structured interviews, document analysis and participant drawings, as data collection methods.

Research question/s

With an aim to reflect the everyday experiences of women academics in an Athena Swan gold-awarded department, this research started with the basic question:

1. What is the impact of Athena Swan accreditation on the lived experiences of women academics?

Further questions emerged during the data collection and analysis process including:

1. How do early- and mid-career academics understand their workplace in relation to their mini cultures in an Athena Swan gold-awarded department?
2. What are the manifestations of the mini subcultural practices on women's experiences in an Athena Swan accredited department?
3. What are the impacts of Athena Swan departmental initiatives on the experiences of women in these subcultural spaces

Implications for HRD practice

The findings provide an increased understanding of the Athena Swan accreditation programme and its implication for accredited universities. The recommendations for the case study organisation can offer guidelines for the participating universities and the HR to form policies and meaningful practices when implementing equality and diversity policies/ practices in their institutions. Though the findings are mainly relevant to the case study department, the spatial performativity related to subcultural spaces may be relevant to those departments that are attempting to implement equality and diversity practices in their workplace. Secondly, it provides Athena Swan itself an insight into the drawbacks of the self-accreditation programme which they can review and improve.

Conclusions

To conclude the findings of this research reject the previous claims of AS accreditation results in an inclusive and supportive culture in Science disciplinary areas (Ovseiko et al., 2019). Also, connecting gender performativity to subcultural spaces, the findings of this thesis have implications for HR practitioners when implementing equality and diversity policies/practices in workplaces.