As Athena SWAN’s Equality Challenge Unit prepares to move to Australia, Sarah Dickinson talks to *International Innovation* about the charters’ unprecedented success to date and discloses future plans.
To provide some context, can you introduce the Athena SWAN charter to our readers?

The charter was founded in 2005. It’s a scheme that recognises commitment to advancing women’s careers in science, technology, engineering, medicine and mathematics (STEMM), employment in higher education and research. It started with 10 founding members, and today counts 132 members and 422 award-holding departments and institutions.

The success of the charter stems from the fact that it was set up in 2005 by academic women in science for academic women in science. The overall aim was to level the playing field by getting institutions and departments to carry out a thorough self-assessment of themselves, their policies and procedures. The point is that this self-assessment was led and championed by senior academics and had senior management buy-in to ensure any changes that were made were sustainable.

The scheme has since expanded and it’s no longer just about women in science. It’s about recognising the advancement of gender equality – acknowledging the advancement of representation, progression and success for all.

This year marks the initiative’s 10th anniversary. What are the biggest success stories for all of them? What do they have in common?

The greatest obstacle has probably been the speed at which it has grown; it has become a victim of its own success to some degree. In July 2011, Dame Sally Davies, Chief Medical Officer for England, made an announcement that the National Institute for Health Research would only expect to shortlist medical schools for Biomedical Research Centre and Unit funding if the school holds an Athena SWAN Silver Award. Although the charter had been slowly building momentum; gaining members and getting applications in, that moment really propelled our position.

We suddenly saw a three-fold increase in the number of applications per round – in April 2012 we had 29 applications in the round, and by November of that year we had 96! Trying to run and manage this scheme, which has grown so rapidly, is a significant challenge for us. I think one of the greatest achievements has been expanding into the humanities and social sciences. We have also expanded to non-higher education affiliated research institutes, which is something we are very proud of.

The mission statement of the Athena SWAN scheme is relevant across the globe. What makes this charter particularly beneficial to Australian universities?

Gender equality is a universal issue. Australian universities experience similar issues to those in the UK. Australian women make up over half of the population, and obtain more than 60 per cent of undergraduate degrees, yet hold less than 30 per cent of tenured jobs within academia. This disparity is higher within the science community, where they have the same leaky pipeline issues that we experience here.

The charter was recently extended to include non-STEMM subjects. What were the motives behind this development, and will Australia enjoy the same breadth of support?

There was a real appetite for the charter within these sectors, with many of them having already adopted the Athena SWAN principles within their departments. We ran a trial in 2013-14 called the Gender Equality Charter Mark (GEM). This was based on the methodology of Athena SWAN but was slightly different. In Athena SWAN applications, questions are based around the functions of organisation and culture, flexibility and managing career breaks, key career transition points and career development. GEM was slightly different – it was based around principles rather than functions. The evaluation of the trial found that, more than anything, people wanted a robust, tried-and-tested charter with a brand identity already respected by the sector, and we already had that in Athena SWAN.

In terms of Australia – and I think this is very sensible – they’re going to focus on the science areas. It’s being supported and set up by the Australian Academy of Science and so that’s their area of expertise. It is running as a pilot, so we’re keen to start things with what’s already known and grown from there.

We tend to acquire preconceptions of gender roles in early childhood; does the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) plan to make its principles known to younger age groups?

At the moment, due to funding constraints we focus solely on higher education. Having said that, we are keen to look at the bigger picture and some of the questions in the Athena SWAN charter are around outreach. We would be keen to do some work with the younger generation and the earlier stages of education.

Given the evidence-based nature of the ECU’s evaluation and support of participating institutions, do you predict the service provided in Australia will differ to that given in England?

No. We are working very closely with the Australian Academy of Science. Recently a staff member come over from Australia to spend a month working with us and shadowing the team in the UK. She was here to attend panels and learn the process from the ground. We are sending a team member to Australia to help run the workshops and initiate the process over there. They will slowly take the reins but we will maintain general oversight of the processes.

Where do you hope to introduce the charter next?

We currently do not have plans to expand to other countries. We have expanded to research institutes in the UK, to Ireland and the arts/humanities and now Australia. We do get enquiries from other countries, usually from academics who have moved abroad. These women have usually benefited from Athena SWAN and tend to tell their new department/team about us. As far as we can tell there is nothing similar anywhere else. Of course it depends on funding and other factors, but it’s very exciting to think we could expand even further!