

# Positive impact of gender mainstreaming in academia and research institutions

Opinion paper





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## Introduction

The landscape of mainstreaming gender in research institutions (including universities) appears to be strongly differentiated, mainly along domestic patterns<sup>(1)</sup>. This is primarily reflected in how the objectives are framed in legislative and policy terms. There are two types of such objectives. The first type is related to fostering gender equality in participation to research activities and access to decision-making in research institutions, the second to integrating gender into research and innovation (R&I) content. While a majority of Member States have designed some piece(s) of legislation to address one or several of these objectives, they have done it to different extents, with different scopes and in different legislative areas (from general gender equality & anti-discrimination policies and/or from legal frameworks for research, innovation and higher education). More specifically, existing legal and policy frameworks at the level of Member States also embody different degrees of support to mainstreaming gender in research organisations<sup>(2)</sup>. Therefore, while there are many examples in a number of countries presenting different features as regards the institutionalisation of Gender Mainstreaming (GM) in research, the positive impact of GM in research should first be assessed against these institutional and legal backgrounds. Those, as shown by the different numbers of Gender Equality Plans (or comprehensive strategies) implemented in respective countries, provide different levels of incentives for mainstreaming gender in research. Additionally, the paths of institutionalisation of GM in research and innovation, as well as the types of policies and supporting initiatives do create conditions for certain interventions, methods or tools to yield better results.

And yet, legal and institutional contexts, which also determine the degree of autonomy of research performing organisations (RPO) in implementing gender mainstreaming or the role of research funding organisations in achieving above-mentioned objectives, are not the only realms within which to assess the positive impact of GM. Institutional and organisational features inherent to each organisation and/or disciplinary fields are also to be considered, especially to frame under which conditions practices identified as triggering positive impact in one specific institution, are likely to product similar effects in another one. From this perspective, attention needs to be paid to the particular key factors of success and context-specific enabling pre-conditions for effective gender mainstreaming in research. Last but not least, examples, case studies and good practices selected for this project cover a variety of implementation contexts, objectives and approaches, indicating that there is no one best way to mainstream gender in research, and that positive impacts can be reached through different means.

The paper is structured along three sections, following this introduction. Section 1 briefly identifies the most favourable institutional, legal and organisational frameworks for mainstreaming gender in research. Section 2 presents the main impact drivers and dimensions of the positive impact of gender mainstreaming on research institutions. Section 3 illustrates this positive impact as evidenced in the process of selecting good practices. Drawing both upon the general and specific conditions for GM to generate positive impacts, Section 4 sketches the case of gender mainstreaming as an effective strategy to achieve gender equality in research organisations and integrating a gender perspective into research.

<sup>(1)</sup> See the Analytical Report on Integrating Gender Equality into Research Performing Organisations (RPO) and universities, EIGE, 2016

<sup>(2)</sup> Ibid.

# 1. Favourable frameworks for gender mainstreaming to yield positive impact on gender equality in academia and research institutions

## 1.1. Legal and policy incentives for implementing comprehensive gender mainstreaming strategies in academia and research Institutions

Member States present different degrees of institutionalisation for gender policies in research and innovation<sup>(3)</sup>. Overall, it can be said that those MS with greater degrees of embeddedness of gender equality objectives into their legal and policy frameworks have created more incentives for research organisations (including universities) not only to tackle gender imbalances or bias in research and innovation, but also to adopt broader, more comprehensive and holistic strategies. This is supported by the fact that in those MS with no or limited legal and policy provisions in this realm, little evidence of such strategies, notably in the form of Gender Equality Plans<sup>(4)</sup>, has been found. Instead, in these Member States, the fieldwork reflected the low priority character or irrelevance of the objectives related to integrating gender in research organisations in the view of interviewed stakeholders, as well as in documented resistances to adopt Gender Mainstreaming (GM) strategies in research organisations. In those countries, the support brought by the European Commission to projects undertaken with a view to integrate gender in research, appeared to be especially the key both for research organisations to adopt such strategies in the absence of legal/policy incentives, and for these strategies to bring positive and measurable impact.

Yet, legal provisions are not per se sufficient to stimulate the adoption of gender mainstreaming strategies, especially in the form of Gender Equality Plans, if not supported by policy documents detailing how principles expounded in the law are meant to be implemented, and by more detailed provisions requiring higher education and/or research

performing organisations to set up their own, internal policy. This is evidenced by the strong correlation between the comprehensiveness of the legal and policy framework, the existence of binding provisions to adopt Gender Equality Plans, and the number of research institutions having adopted such GM instruments. Formal, specific provisions requiring higher education institutions and/or non-university RPOs to put in place and implement structured policies in the form of Gender Equality Plans, exist only in 6 EU Member States (AT, DE, ES, FI, IT, SE). Due to the obligation for public universities and research organisations, to adopt equality objectives and to the strong incentives stemming from the Equality Act (2010) and the Equality Duty it entails for public organisations, the United Kingdom (especially as regards England, Scotland and Wales), can also be considered to present a favourable legal framework. Together, these 6 + 1 countries concentrate both the greatest proportion of GEPs (over 90% of those being implemented in the EU in 2015), and the largest number of selected good practices. Therefore, it can be argued that gender mainstreaming in research requires strong legal and policy incentives, and that research institutions are much less prone to engage with its implementation in the absence thereof.

Additionally, degrees of institutionalisation do not solely matter, but also patterns of institutionalisation. In Germany and Spain, for instance, the fact that provisions exist – and complement each other – at the national and the subnational levels, explains part of the diffusion of gender mainstreaming in higher education and research. In Belgium, multi-level governance accounts for the differences in institutionalising gender policies in research in Flanders on the one hand, and Brussels and Wallonia regions, on the other. In Sweden, the existence of a long experience in implementing GM at the level of public organisations, and of accountability mechanisms for reviewing the effectiveness of GM strategies, certainly contributed to building the case of gender policies in research performing organisations.

<sup>(3)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(4)</sup> For the purpose of the study, reference is made to the definition of Gender Equality Plans given by the European Commission, as a set of actions aiming at conducting impact assessment / audits of procedures and practices to identify gender bias; implementing innovative strategies to correct any bias; setting targets and monitoring progress via indicators. See: *European Commission's Communication on 'A Reinforced European Research Area Partnership for Excellence and Growth'* (COM(2012) 392 final) <http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2012/EN/1-2012-392-EN-F1-1.Pdf>



## 1.2. Other supporting factors for implementing comprehensive Gender Mainstreaming strategies in academia and research organisations

Favourable frameworks, however, are not only shaped by legal and policy provisions. Other initiatives have proven to effectively support GM implementation in the Member States. The most impactful of these initiatives is evidently the Athena-SWAN Charter promoted in the UK and Ireland by the Equality Challenge Unit. Alone, this initiative has been key for the adoption and implementation of over 500 GEPs. In the UK, 136 out of 168 research institutions have adopted their strategies as part of the Athena-SWAN Charter scheme. Its contribution to mainstreaming gender in research performing organisations is so widely acknowledged, that peer judged stimulants such as prizes and awards which provide competition between institutes to gain funding and/or key staff and/or recognition, was quoted as one of the basic requirements for results-orientated actions towards gender equality.

Besides, this scheme not only requires from applicants to evidence their commitment to the objectives of the Charter by adopting and implementing what can be considered a gender mainstreaming strategy, but also to evidence the sustainability and positive impact of these strategies in order to enhance their Athena-SWAN profile and/or to maintain it.

As a further evidence of the effectiveness of this initiative, the National Institute for Health Research included the participation and scores of applicants in the Athena SWAN scheme as an eligibility criterion for funding. Although legal requirements created by the Equality Act also contributed to provide incentives for research institutions and universities, to implement gender mainstreaming, these and the Athena SWAN scheme mutually reinforced each other. As a consequence, gender equality initiatives led outside this scheme are believed to be less sustainable.

Mutually reinforcing policy framework and targeted initiatives are also found in Germany, where both the Programme for Women Professors and the Research-Oriented Standards on Gender Equality of the German Research Foundation (DFG) require gender equality strategies to be adopted. In addition to binding requirements at the federal and regional levels, these initiatives have proved to be attractive to many research institutions, and supportive to gender mainstreaming implementation. Even where legal frameworks do not present the same degree of comprehensiveness, as in Denmark or France, voluntary initiatives such as Charters for gender equality in France, as well as the Charter for More Women in Management and the 'Operation Chain Reaction' in Denmark, which both aimed at promoting women in decision-making positions, have had some positive impact on the commitment of research performing organisations to gender mainstreaming. Yet charters need to entail strong incentives, and are more likely to produce long lasting effects if embedded in a favourable policy framework.

## 2. Main impact drivers for effective gender mainstreaming at the level of academia and research organisations

### 2.1. Impact drivers at the institutional level in academia and research organisations

Stakeholders across the European Union largely converged about factors serving as potential impact drivers for gender mainstreaming in academia and research institutions. Although combining differently depending on domestic and organisational institutional settings, the main factors appear to be the following:

**Top-management support and acceptance** is the most widely quoted enabling condition for gender mainstreaming strategies to produce measurable and sustainable impacts in research performing organisations. As regards top-management, reference was primarily made to central governing bodies and people in central decision-making positions such as (vice)rectors, (vice)chancellors, deans, presidents or executive directors. This support does not only aim at limiting internal resistances, but also at providing gender equality strategies with greater legitimacy and visibility. Top management support is key to mobilise all components, levels and communities within the organisation, and to make gender equality an integral part of its profile and strategic objectives.

**Well-equipped and well-located gender equality bodies** provide gender mainstreaming with human resources, knowledge and expertise. Depending on the structure of the organisation, these bodies have to be located at the appropriate level so as to effectively support GM implementation. Proximity to decision-making, capacity to inform human resource and scientific management offer better guarantees for an effective monitoring and implementation. Knowledge, including the production of sex-disaggregated data, is key to equip these bodies. It is also important that well-equipped and well-located gender equality bodies exert some leadership on gender mainstreaming implementation, with the support of executive bodies.

While **dedicated funding** is missing in most Member States, there is evidence that well-funded gender mainstreaming strategies and Gender Equality Plans are even more likely to produce institutional changes: this is the case

for domestic initiatives (DE, ES, SE) as well as for projects funded under EU Framework Programmes. In Germany, the Women Professors Programme, funding full professorships for female academics revealed highly competitive, and favourable to the adoption of broader gender equality strategies in universities. In Spain, initiatives in favour of gender equality and a gender perspective in research received over 7 million Euro of funding between 2008 and 2012, while in Sweden, resources were made available both for funding tailor-made gender equality policies in research performing organisations, and supporting the evaluation of these policies. The fieldwork also evidenced that Gender Equality Plans implemented with the support of EU framework programmes, are well placed to design and initiate innovative, holistic strategies.

**Cooperation among different categories of stakeholders** is paramount to achieve sustainable changes in all components of the organisation. Building alliances with key stakeholders is not seen as sufficient: broader networks between the organisation's units so as to cover different organisational and/or disciplinary sub-cultures and practices, as well as grass-roots engagement and commitment are also necessary to yield positive impacts. The positive impact of such cooperation and networking, is yet conditioned by the clear distribution of tasks and responsibilities among stakeholders.

**Embedment into existing management procedures and structures** also supports effective gender mainstreaming by ensuring greater institutionalisation and sustainability of planned measures. For instance, measures targeting recruitment and appraisal should be incorporated in broader recruitment and career management procedures. Similarly, gender training initiatives are more likely to be institutionalised, if incorporated in broader training or life-long learning schemes. Monitoring instruments, in the forms of quantitative and qualitative indicators, and regular surveys, which are often designed in isolation, gain relevance and sustainability when incorporated into routinised management procedures. A similar pre-requisite applies to other existing gender equality initiatives: in the UK, gender mainstreaming strategies and instruments designed at the level of RPOs, should be aligned with the Athena SWAN scheme, so as to ensure both sustainability and visibility.



## 2.2. Impact drivers at the level of planning and monitoring

While above-mentioned factors contribute to shaping institutional settings to become more favourable to effectively implement gender mainstreaming in academia and research organisations, other impact drivers are to be found at the level of policy planning and monitoring.

Firstly, as regards how gender mainstreaming strategies are planned, **collaborative planning processes** are acknowledged to design measures which are likely to reach a greater impact: bringing together different stakeholders – some in decision-making positions – with different expertise and types of knowledge as concerns the functioning of the organisation, helps building more targeted policies, anticipating potential resistances and pursuing greater acceptance and support. A mixed team, in terms of positions within the organisation, genders, seniority or disciplinary backgrounds, can also bring about strategies that set gender equality as an objective in a way that permeates the whole organisation. A collaborative process offers time for dialogue, clarifying objectives and responsibilities, thus generating synergies and increased legitimacy and ownership of the strategy, which supports the implementation process of the proposed measures.

Gender equality planning should be driven by **clear targets and objectives**, defined for each of the planned measures and/or areas of action, with clearly ascribed responsibilities with regard to their attainment. Clarity includes putting efforts in framing gender equality as a meaningful issue, relevant to the whole community, and providing an explanation of what a Gender Equality Plan is and entails. Being **practical** and **concrete** in setting targets and formulating objectives can also effectively support the ownership of the strategy by the whole research community. Moreover, objectives should not (only) be long term, but also short- and mid-term, in order to better account for failures, successes and challenges.

**The availability of sex-disaggregated data** and other data relevant to document the status of gender (in)equality within the organisation, appears to be precondition for the impact of measures and initiatives to be designed. The pre-existence of such data, their accessibility and, in case they are not present, the launch of in-depth auditing processes in forms of surveys, focus groups, and pilot interviews, do provide necessary grounds for the design of

effective strategies. Indeed, making proposed measures evidenced-based not only allows for adequately distributing resources and tackling problems, but also for overcoming potential resistances and monitoring achievements.

Implementing a gender mainstreaming strategy in research performing organisations, as in any types of organisations, necessitates knowledge and expertise. This is not only to be guaranteed at the time of designing and planning measures, but also for their implementation and monitoring. **Competence building**, which allows for transferring and enhancing knowledge among a greater number of stakeholders, should therefore be pursued.

Often due to the absence of clearly defined targets and objectives, and/or to the absence of relevant data, **monitoring instruments** seem insufficient in many of the Gender Equality Plans reviewed for this study. And yet, creating implementation follow-up mechanisms is paramount. These mechanisms can take the form of implementation clusters or networks, regular surveys or data collection, and of indicators fully integrated into governance and management monitoring systems. As evidenced during the fieldwork, even well-designed and comprehensive strategies implemented in academia and research institutions, often lack effective monitoring mechanisms, limiting both their impact and the very possibility to measure this impact. Where available, a monitoring strategy, with follow-up indicators appear to increase the accountability and sustainability of gender mainstreaming strategies, as in Sweden, where quantitative indicators used to monitor goals on recruitment and upwards mobility, and quantitative survey to monitor work environments, provide key instruments for the overall assessment of GM in research. Both qualitative and quantitative indicators have to be SMART: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time-related.

Where absent or insufficient, monitoring mechanisms do not allow for the mid- and long-term **evaluation** of gender mainstreaming strategies. This is detrimental to the effectiveness of future strategies, which cannot draw upon lessons learnt from previous initiatives, but also to the visibility and measurability of actual achievements, which are not always formally attributed to the implementation of specific measures. This undermines the capacity of their promoters to assess their achievements and communicate about them. Evaluations, as monitoring, are especially key because changing institutions in prospect for greater equality and the integration of a gender perspective in research, are two overarching objectives that require **time** to be achieved.



## 3. Evidencing the positive impact of gender mainstreaming in academia AND research organisations

### 3.1. Assessing the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming strategies in academia and research organisations

As emphasised by the expert stakeholders, progress towards achieving gender equality is slow and gender equality itself is a moving target that can be seen in greater institutionalisation of gender equality, higher awareness, lower levels of gender prejudice, more gender-sensitive procedures used on a regular basis, lower acceptance of sexist behaviours, and improvement of gender ratios, among others. Effectiveness can be measured differently also depending on the disciplinary scope, size and complexity of each organisation. Benefits of bringing gender equality and a gender perspective in research also need to be articulated in a way that ensures that research institutions understand their importance and relevance to their key missions and to the main features of their functioning. The benefits need to be tangible and it needs to be clear that structural/organisational change will benefit both women and men.

Also, evidence of a positive impact of specific interventions were identified and analysed drawing upon a set of criteria used in the assessment of good practices in gender mainstreaming by EIGE and further refined over the study to correspond to the specific field of research. Main used criteria were those previously identified by EIGE: a) the practice should have been working well; b) to be transferable to other contexts, c) to offer learning potential on how to think and act appropriately. Additional criteria were used for the collection of evidence – embeddedness into a wider gender mainstreaming strategy, and/or a Gender Equality Plan, and signs of effective achievement in terms of advancement of gender equality.

Due to the diversity of institutional, organisational and disciplinary features, it is to be highlighted that transferability does not necessarily mean that a practice needs to (or can) be replicated by all institutions across the EU: it may be transferable to some institutions with similar features, which requires to identify the transferable aspects of each practice, as well as the conditions that make the replication

possible. Therefore, a more thorough set of criteria and sub-criteria<sup>(?)</sup> was used to select 'good practices' which not only provide evidence of the positive impact of gender mainstreaming, but also reflect the above-mentioned impact drivers and cover the different dimensions of gender mainstreaming in research performing organisations.

### 3.2. Evidence supporting the positive impact of gender mainstreaming in academia and research organisations

As concerns **structures to support gender equality work and incentives to promote gender equality**, the selected practices evidence how gender mainstreaming strategies can positively impact research institution, and under which specific conditions. For example, at Goethe University Frankfurt (Germany), **Gender & Diversity Controlling** is embedded in the obligation for all faculties to set up a Gender Equality & Diversity Action Plan every two years and to comply with reporting requirements. This process is steered by the Gender & Diversity Controlling coordinator who provides the faculties with data, tools and advice and ultimately assesses the new action plan, through the following four-step cycle: (1) analysis of the status quo and needs assessment; (2) planning of gender equality measures addressing the identified needs; (3) implementation of these measures; and (4) assessment of successes and shortcomings of the measures. The guidance and monitoring provided by the unit is not limited to the assessment of the Gender Equality & Diversity Plans, but includes a broader set of indicators and the design of several tools which are continuously being updated and adjusted. This approach is participatory and inclusive by ensuring the involvement of the University Senate, faculty representatives, along with other structures of the university, and is likely to be transferable to other universities. It could be observed that the Gender Equality and Diversity Action Plans at faculty level had been significantly enhanced with respect to the previous period, and that the active involvement of a variety of stakeholders in gender equality-related efforts within the faculties had increased over the years.

(?) Sub-criteria include for instance "checkability", 'SMARTness' (for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-based)

**Gender Perspective in Research and Teaching Award**

(Spain) organised at the University of Santiago de Compostela illustrates the positive impact of peer-judged stimulants which provide incentives for virtuous competition: the award has generated significant impact in the university's community, with over 260 applicants presenting nearly 100 total eligible achievements since 2010, and it is fostering synergies with other initiatives undertaken by the university such as gender training and conferences and an increase in the visibility of gender issues in research and teaching.

The **Gender Certification project** was initiated in 2007 and aims at motivating, starting processes and giving tools for an integration of a gender perspective in all education (and research) at Lund University, Sweden. Three departments were involved in the pilot project, which was also co-funded by the Swedish government. By looking at the Physics Department as an example, the project led to an engagement in many different activities. Some divisions went through positive changes in gender balance, and possibly also in culture and choice of subject.

As concerns **awareness-raising and competence development**, at Linköping University (Sweden), a **gender lectureship** actively contributes to the gender mainstreaming within the content and/or form of study programmes and into the development of pedagogical models for work based on equality and gender. A gender lecturer is a researcher, well established within the faculty, who helps integrating gender issues within educational programmes on a part-time basis. The approach is that mainstreaming gender is possible in every area, although through different strategies: if a gender perspective cannot be brought in in terms of content, it can be addressed how the discipline is being taught. As such, the gender lectureship challenges gender bias and unequal power distribution, through mainstreaming gender knowledge. The lectureship is permanent and established in the University's plan.

Regarding **personnel selection, recruitment and career progression**, the **bias sensitising workshop** organised by the gender equality office at Graz University, Austria aims at creating reflexivity about gender and other

discrimination-related biases in personnel selection procedures, and at creating a general understanding that equality and quality are mutually reinforcing aims. The training takes place over two half-day sessions of five hours each, and is facilitated by external experts as well as internal university gender equality experts. In this workshop, participants gain knowledge about diversity issues, societal inequalities, and academic evaluation procedures. In Denmark, the University of Copenhagen modified its recruitment procedures, requesting at least one applicant of either sex before a vacant post can be filled.

Regarding **leadership and decision-making, the new election procedure for the Board of Ghent University (Belgium)** requires faculties to have at least one male and one female candidate for the elections. If the elections have an unbalanced gender outcome (not respecting the minimum 40/60 gender balance) the candidate with the least votes from the overrepresented sex (compared to other faculties) has to give way to the faculty's candidate of the other sex with the highest number of votes. Although it triggered some resistances, the new procedures paved the way for substantial changes: as a result of the 2014 election, the Board has now a 50/50 composition. There was no further need to implement positive measures to elect a female representative and the reformed election attracted the most voters ever in the history of the University. With the same purpose, the Siauliai University (Lithuania) drafted a strategy integrating a thorough gender mainstreaming planning for each election phase: selection of right candidates, lobbying and support for women candidates. The goal of the initiative was to increase women's representation up to 25% at the University Council, but it exceeded the goal and reached 36%.

**With respect to organisational culture & work-life balance**, the Maternity Cover Fund put in place at Queens University Belfast (UK) provides assistance to Schools and Directorates. It ensures that the essential work of all staff members who take maternity leave is covered so that they can enjoy maternity leave. The outcome of this Fund and policy is a 100 % return rate after leave since it was put in place.

## 4. Prospect: sketching the case of gender mainstreaming

Quoted practices reflect the different dimensions to be tackled by a gender mainstreaming strategy. They also provide evidence that positive impacts can be reached in different institutional or disciplinary settings and through a variety of approaches. Yet, it is clear that legal, institutional, organisational and process-related impact drivers highlighted in this opinion paper, are key to bring about these impacts.

Promoting gender equality in academia and research organisations leads to improved social dialogue and cooperation among stakeholders, involve all staff categories and students in a joint effort to produce change, and reinforce the notion of a common identity, accountability and ownership. This is reported to increase well-being at work, thus leading to greater motivation and effectiveness, especially important to a human resource-intensive activity. Retaining female researchers and making the most of the full pool of talents, within a knowledge-based economy, is also described as one of the benefits of successful gender mainstreaming strategies.

Additionally, structural changes requested to achieve gender equality also bring benefits in terms of decision-making procedures, career management schemes and research evaluation procedures. More broadly, expert stakeholders<sup>(6)</sup> supported the idea that integrating gender in research performing organisations also increases research performance,

creativity, innovation and excellence in research. Gender equality is thus understood as essential to further development in research as well as contributing to the research organisation's competitive edge, as regards attracting talents, securing funding, enhancing research quality and the validity of its potential applications. The benefits of the gender equality change in academia and research institutions relate to the research institutions' visions of a sustainable society and sustainable growth through research and education.

Yet, it must be emphasised that more efforts are needed to provide evidence of impact of gender mainstreaming strategies in research performing organisations. Structural changes to achieve gender equality and bringing a gender perspective in research require a longer timeframe<sup>(7)</sup> to measure their effectiveness. Both short-term and long-term impacts should be pursued to ensure the mobilisation of research organisations over time and to make qualitative and quantitative evidence more salient.

It is important to develop thorough monitoring and evaluation strategies to link more systematically qualitative and quantitative improvements to the positive impact of gender mainstreaming and show evidence and benefit of the adopted approaches and transformation.

<sup>(6)</sup> Results of the on-line consultation meeting organised by EIGE on 20 October 2015.

<sup>(7)</sup> Five up to ten years, according to experts who contributed to the on-line consultation held by EIGE on 20/10/2015, as well as according to experts who participated in the STAGES (EU-funded structural change project) final conference in Brussels on 03/12/2015.

