

Gender Equality in Academia and Research

Malta

COUNTRY: Malta

PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY IN RESEARCH

Legal framework

As of June 2021, no national laws promoting gender equality in research were adopted in Malta. However, the Maltese Parliament is at advanced stages of discussion of the Equality Bill, with approval expected in the second half of 2021. This Bill consolidates and strengthens the current equality legislation in Malta, ensuring equal protection against discrimination for all protected characteristics (gender, disability, race, sexual orientation, etc.) in all areas of life. It obliges the government to ensure equality mainstreaming when formulating and implementing laws, regulations, administrative provisions, policies and activities.

In March 2019, online public consultation began on “Towards a Gender Equality Mainstreaming Framework”^[1]. The results will inform a Gender Equality Mainstreaming Strategy and Action Plan, to be implemented by the Gender Mainstreaming Unit^[2] in the Human Rights Directorate^[3] of the Ministry of Equality, Innovation and Research.

Policy framework

As of June 2021, there were no specific national policies promoting gender equality in research. However, a first-ever “Gender Equality Strategy for Research and Innovation” (R&I) was developed as part of the National European Research Area (ERA) Roadmap 2015–2020^[4]. The Malta Council for Science and Technology (MCST) oversees implementation of that roadmap. Priority 4 – Gender Equality and Gender Mainstreaming prioritises putting equality legislation into effective action to address gender imbalances in research institutions and decision-making bodies. It also commits to better integrating the gender dimension into research and development (R&D) policies, programmes and projects, from context analysis to formulating corresponding priorities and implementation policies and measures. These top actions and objectives were formulated only in general, broad terms, however, and lacked concrete indicators and targets.

Other stimulatory initiatives

The MCST partnered with the University of Malta on the Horizon 2020 project “GENDER equality in the ERA Community To Innovate policy implementatiON” (GENDERACTION^[5]). The project support Maltese stakeholders to progress towards implementing gender equality in R&I, building new collaborations and capacity in gender equality through participation in training events and mutual learning opportunities with other stakeholders, and advancing gender equality in international cooperation in science, technology and innovation.

The MCST has assisted Malta’s higher education institutions (HEIs) in developing their internal policies on gender in R&I, including Gender Equality Plans (GEPs). This action is being implemented through various activities, including Webinar Wednesday (e.g. Gender Issues and Equality Plans in Horizon Europe, broadcast on 30 June 2021).

The National STEM [science, technology, engineering, mathematics] Awards in 2021^[6] included a “Women in STEM” category to recognise institutions and individuals contributing to gender equality in STEM. The award is part of the STEM Engagement Working Group. Chaired by the National Interactive Science Centre (Esplora), the Group brings together members from the Malta Council for Science and Technology, the University of Malta, Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology, the Ministry for Education, the Institute for Education, JobsPlus, the National Skills Council, and Tech.mt.

Although not specifically focused on gender equality in research, measures to improve work-life balance are increasingly being adopted in Malta. Examples include extension of maternity leave allowance, additional free childcare centres, tax credits for those using private childcare centres and for women returning to work after an absence of at least five years, etc.. The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) is implementing a number of projects that aim to combat gender stereotypes.

Key actors

Established in 1988, the MCST is the main Maltese public organisation in a position to steer legal, policy and other strategic developments in gender equality in R&I. The MCST is not only a research funding organisation, but is the government body responsible for research policy, promoting scientific research and management of the national research funding programme. It is also the national contact point organisation for the EU Research Framework Programme. The MCST falls within the remit of the Ministry of Equality, Innovation and Research.

INITIATIVES FOR GENDER EQUALITY BY RESEARCH PERFORMING ORGANISATIONS

Malta's universities and research organisations have yet to set up GEPs. Other approaches and initiatives can be highlighted, however.

The University of Malta is one of the main HEIs and research organisations in Malta. Its Gender Equality and Sexual Diversity Committee^[7] has served as a focal point for gender issues since 1991. The Committee advises the Rector and the Council on gender equality issues. The University's Department of Gender Studies^[8] is built on three pillars: teaching, research and activism. Finally, a Diploma in Gender, Work and Society^[9] is available through the Centre of Labour Market Studies at the University. This government-sponsored course is free to students and provides training in gender-related issues, as well as facilitating relevant student research.

RELEVANT EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES

Gender Equality and Sexual Diversity Committee

The Gender Equality and Sexual Diversity Committee^[10] was set up in 1991 as part of the University of Malta. Initially, the main objective was to act as a focal point for gender issues. The Committee is appointed by the University Council and advises the Rector and the Council on issues of gender equality. It reports to the Council each year.

The Committee's Policy^[11] includes a list of legislation and important circulars related to gender equality (particularly equality at work) and is followed by a commitment to the promotion of good employment practice. The Committee works in various areas, such as the identification of sources of unequal opportunities or treatment, and promotes a policy of equal opportunities. It also receives and monitors staff and student complaints of sex-discriminatory practices, recommends an appropriate action, and works closely with sexual harassment advisors. In addition, the Committee promotes teaching and research that reflects the knowledge, experience, and aspirations of both women and men.

Since 2017, the Committee has coordinated the organisation of various activities to promote and build capacity for gender mainstreaming^[12] in curricula and research. These activities improved awareness and prompted significant elements of gender equality to be introduced in the "University of Malta Strategic Plan 2020-2025"^[13]. A specific equality plan, organisational structures and resources are now being put in place in order to systematically support gender equality in research.

Gender equality in the national R&I funding programme (FUSION)

The national R&I funding programme, FUSION, is managed by the MCST. The funding rules were revised in 2017 to make the implementation of gender equality the decisive factor in cases where two or more research projects score the same in their evaluation. The specific provision states that "if two or more projects obtain the same mark following evaluation, then [the] MCST shall give priority to that project which provides the best consideration to the implementation of gender equality in the research project".

Despite being in force, the measure has yet to be used, as the MCST has always had sufficient funding to for all projects with the same score. Nevertheless, the MCST intends to keep this measure and it may be used in future.

Development of cross-curricular programmes

Since 2016, the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) has developed and implemented a number of cross-curricular programmes to expose students to a range of study units, both those traditionally attracting mainly women and those typically attracting men students. This is intended to improve gender balance in the pursuit of scientific studies and careers in Malta.

The take-up of these programmes has been very limited, most likely because students prefer to focus on their own area of study rather than straddling two specialisations.

Other measures, such as increasing the visibility of alumni graduates and role models from the less represented gender when promoting study programmes, have created small but steady improvements in the gender-balanced take-up of various study programmes at MCAST.

Footnotes

[1] https://meae.gov.mt/en/Public_Consultations/MEAE/Pages/Consultations/Tow...

[2] <https://humanrights.gov.mt/en/Pages/Gender%20Equality/About-Us0421-2266....>

[3] <https://humanrights.gov.mt/en/Pages/About-Us.aspx>

[4] https://era.gv.at/public/documents/2897/MT_National_ERA_Roadmap_2020.pdf

[5] <https://genderaction.eu/>

[6] <http://mcst.gov.mt/mcst-news/national-stem-awards-2021/>

[7] <https://www.um.edu.mt/about/gender>

[8] <https://www.um.edu.mt/socialwellbeing/genderstudies>

[9] <https://www.um.edu.mt/courses/overview/UDGWSPTD-2021-2-0>

[10] <https://www.um.edu.mt/about/gender>

[11] https://www.um.edu.mt/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/436890/genderissuespol...

[12] <https://www.um.edu.mt/about/gender/ouractivities>

[13] https://www.um.edu.mt/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/439692/UMStrategicPlan...