

AKKA leadership programme



Attracting more women into academic leadership positions

In 2004, Lund University launched a gender-integrated leadership programme (AKKA). Within this programme, leadership is understood as something that can be learnt and developed, and that focuses on the individual's competences, and not on personal characteristics. The AKKA programme aims at raising gender knowledge and awareness, and providing methods and tools for structural change in order to achieve sustainable gender equality. From 2004 to 2014, five AKKA programmes have been offered for 150 senior scholars in Lund University (Sweden) (of which 37 were men). The programme runs over a year with monthly meetings.

Throughout the years, AKKA has increased the number of women in leading positions, contributed to an enhanced visibility of women as potential leaders, increased willingness of both women and men to assume leadership positions, raised gender awareness among female and male academic leaders, promoted networking and collaboration within the university, raised the knowledge about the university's politics and activities, developed tools to deal with resistance to gender issues and for change management, contributed to highlight discrimination, and developed concrete change projects.

The rationale behind the AKKA programme

Back in 2004, few women upheld leadership positions in the university. For instance, the university had eight deans, of which only one was a woman. Considering this situation, the AKKA programme defined short and long term goals. The short-term goal of the programme was to encourage female researchers working at Lund University to apply for deans and vice-deans. The long-term goal consisting in increasing the number of female leaders at the university, and breaking the male power base.

The university understood that positive actions targeting women were not enough and that more women does not necessarily lead to sustainable gender equality. As such, the university needed gender-aware leaders who will serve as “change agents” and who will identify and address discriminating structures in the academia. As such, the AKKA programme was designed to raise gender knowledge and awareness, and provide methods and tools for structural change in order to achieve sustainable gender equality.

Nevertheless, structural changes are not, and should not be, only women’s responsibility. This is a responsibility of both women and men. Therefore, AKKA aims to be a forum for discussion of higher education politics and activities, as well as for networking within and across faculty boundaries.

AKKA's basic concept is that leadership can be learnt: a person is not “born” leader, s/he “becomes” a leader. Hereby, the focus shifts from personal characteristics to competencies, something that could be achieved and developed. Certainly, personal characteristics play a role, but they are not innate or given once and for all. Personal characteristics are in fact cultural constructs related to gender roles. Women in leadership positions are often depicted in complementary terms to men. The leadership role is frequently narrowed to gender stereotypical patterns.

Such stereotypes have affected the expectations of a leader’s role and its individual approaches. AKKA's message is that everyone can develop leadership skills irrespective of their gender. “Doing leadership”, to make herself or himself a leader, is a process over time and requires both theory and practice, both knowledge and reflection. For this reason, the duration of the programme is extended to over a year with monthly gatherings. This design is highly valued and also helps the participants to get to know each other and to create sustainable networks.

Contributing to structural change through a leadership programme

Within this programme, the academic organisation and academic leadership are subjected to critical scrutiny from a gender perspective. The purpose is to address gender structures and make visible the gendered power structure (an academic gender regime or culture) that generates different possibilities and conditions for women and men.

This programme does not see women as the “problem”, but rather the gendered structures. The following issues are addressed: Why are there so few female leaders at Lund University? How does gender operate in the academic culture? What are the effects of the gender structures on the academic organisation and activities? In what ways is leadership gendered? Do women and men at the university enjoy equal opportunities and conditions?

The AKKA programme understands that a gender-sensitive leadership is a leadership that also works to change other discriminatory structures such as class, ethnicity and sexuality. This programme aims at contributing to an intersectional understanding of the gender concept.

The AKKA programme

From 2004 to 2014, five AKKA programmes have been offered to 150 senior scholars. The first two programmes only targeted women. The following programmes also invited men invited to participate. In total, until 2014, 37 men participated in the programme. Whereas one programme (AKKA IV, 2010-2011) received support from the Swedish government (Delegation for Equal Opportunities in Academia), the remaining four were funded by Lund University.

Within its five editions, the programme followed the same structure, including seminars, workshops and a project work.

A seminar with one (or more) invited lecturers is usually followed up by a workshop to discuss the topic, with or without the presenter. The lecturers are prominent gender researchers in leadership, in academic organisation, as well as other relevant topics. In addition, representatives of the university, along with a few external consultants, are invited as lecturers.

The topics of the seminars have been relatively constant throughout all programmes: university organisation and governance; current university issues; faculty's structure, management and activities; leadership and gender; equality and diversity; academic culture; ethical aspects of leadership; rhetoric, debate and communication; and finally the academic and personal leadership. In the latest programme, the gender perspective evolved to include gender in knowledge production.

The workshops serve as a discussion forum where participants exchange experiences and knowledge, a sort of "peer learning", where problems are approached from a multidisciplinary point of view. Case studies and role plays designed by the participants are used as pedagogical tools. Participants from previous AKKA programmes are occasionally engaged as supervisors and to provide support.

The project work is introduced at the opening session and runs in parallel with other programme activities. The project work allows the participants to deepen their knowledge about the faculty and its management. The purpose of project work is to identify and analyse particular discriminatory practices or other problems within the faculty.

The identified problem must have a clear and integrated gender and diversity perspective, and focus on the possibilities for change. The purpose is to provide constructive solutions. The project work is carried out individually or in groups, and is published in the final report of each edition of the AKKA programme.

Overcoming resistance in the programme

The gender-sensitive approach adopted by the AKKA programme has generally been perceived as very positive, instructive and new. However, suspicion and resistance were encountered in the mixed-gender programmes. Resistance was manifested mainly by men: they hogged or interrupted the activities, they expressed negativism towards gender issues, they were rather defensive, made faces, sighed, checked emails, played with cell phones, among others. These actions can be summarised in oral and body language.

Other manifestations of resistance could be noted among the male participants, by excelling and trying to outdo each other. Men signalled male affinity with each other. In the women-only programme, as well as in the mixed gender programmes, it was noted that, in certain situations, women were loyal to men. Individual women showed loyalty to men (no matter if men were present) because they wanted to downplay the significance of gender. They endorsed men by being a (relatively) quiet and confirmatory audience.

An interesting observation is that those participants who were already gender-aware (mainly women), both legitimised the gender perspective and served as “boundary workers”. Their interventions contributed constructively to convey a gender perspective to the others. They quashed the possibilities for creating a platform for opposition.

Resistance was understood as unfamiliarity to gender studies. The strategy chosen to address this unawareness was to strengthen the programme’s gender perspective. Gender issues permeate the whole process: from the announcement, selection and admission to the programme, as well as its structure and contents, working methods and practices.

A mandatory course book, a handbook on gender and leadership, was introduced to bridge the knowledge gap and enhance the gender awareness. This strategy legitimated the gender perspective. In the 2013-2014 programme, resistance turned into interest, acceptance and active engagement.

Learning from the experience

By the spring semester of 2015, the impact of the AKKA programme is noticeable. Lund University has now one female deputy vice-chancellor, five female deans out of eight (of which three participated in the programme), both female and male participants of the AKKA programme are vice-deans and department heads, and more than half of the participants held leading positions at various levels within the university.

The AKKA programmes are continuously assessed through questionnaires filled in by the participants. The programme officers have further summarised their experiences and reflections in the “AKKA White Book” (AKKA Vitbok, 2012). The programme is also assessed by external evaluators in order to provide a neutral perspective on programme quality and effectiveness. Reports from the programmes are continuously published (2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2015). The following results and effects of the programme have been recognised:

- Increasing the number of women in leading positions;
- Raising visibility of women as potential leaders;
- Increasing willingness of both women and men to assume leadership;
- Raising gender awareness among academic leaders – men and women;
- Contributing to networking and collaboration within the university;
- Raising knowledge of university politics and activities;
- Developing tools to deal with resistance to gender issues, and for change management;
- Contributing to highlight discrimination;
- Developing concrete change projects.

The programme has been presented by the programme officers at several Swedish and Nordic universities. It served as inspiration for local leadership programmes (such as in the universities of Uppsala and Växjö). The programme was also presented at Nagoya University in Japan and used as a model for a leadership programme.

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Further information

The AKKA reports and the White Book will be available online in March 2016. For earlier access please contact Inger Lövkrona (inger.lovkrona@kultur.lu.se).

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