

Gender Equality in Academia and Research

Rationale for gender equality change in research and higher education institutions

Setting up and implementing a plan requires strong arguments about the benefits of working towards gender equality in universities and research institutions. These supporting arguments are of different nature and outreach. They can be combined in different ways to build the case for gender equality within the institution, and to reach different categories of stakeholders.

The scope of arguments to be used needs to be adapted to the culture of the institution. In particular, you should be cautious about the uptake and acceptance of performance-related arguments. While it is widely accepted that measuring performance matters in research, this framing is not accepted to the same extent in every context.

Benefits

It is generally acknowledged that promoting gender equality in research organisations and higher education institutions brings **positive impact** with respect to:

- compliance with domestic and EU regulations
- well-being at work
- social dialogue and cooperation among stakeholders
- internal decision-making and career management procedures
- inclusiveness and the sense of community
- the quality of research (and teaching)
- the overall profile of the organisation in a competitive environment

In itself, quoting these broad areas of impact can help build the case for gender equality policies. It is however not sufficient, and potential benefits should be formulated so as to be directly relevant to different categories of stakeholders. The **main types of benefits** are:

Compliance with domestic and EU regulations

Although to different extents, all universities and research organisations are bound to respect certain legal obligations related to discrimination and gender equality. Even if it may vary, there is a cost for breaching existing regulations. This cost can consist in fines, legal prosecutions and liability, damaged reputation, a loss of attractiveness or internal conflicts.

Complying with the rules requires resources and know-how, which are often more easily secured if implementing a gender mainstreaming strategy (for instance, sex-disaggregated data production, monitoring instruments, etc.). Investing in gender equality helps organisations to comply with legal provisions more comprehensively and proactively.

Find out more information about the EU labour law [here](#).

Check also the [legal and policy frameworks promoting gender equality in research of the 28 EU Member States](#).

Creating better work environments

Research organisations and universities are also work environments in which all staff should be able to freely develop their skills and fulfil their expectations. Since these work environments are made up of women and men, adopting a gender sensitive perspective in this regard is sensible.

Beyond compliance with existing rules, preventing verbal, psychological and physical gender-based offenses is a basic requirement for a safe, gender-friendly work environment.

Enabling work-life balance in the organisation, distribution and planning of work, brings benefits for both sexes. These benefits are relevant both to the individuals, in terms of well-being and motivation, and to the organisation, in terms of effectiveness. Besides, better work environments contribute to retaining and attracting talents. They are part of a more sustainable management of human resources.

Attracting and retaining talents

Research activities are highly intensive in human capital. Training qualified and creative researchers is costly, and bringing them up to their full potential takes time. Moreover, research organisations are involved in an intense competition for talent. This makes it especially necessary to address the full pool of talents, including women – even when those are under-represented.

It also requires retaining research staff over time and to give them the opportunity to achieve their personal and professional objectives and potential. It has been shown that women are abandoning their scientific careers in much greater numbers than men.

Described as the “leaky pipeline” of women in science, this phenomenon has a considerable impact: a loss of knowledge, an organisational cost and a reduced and limited perspective in scientific research. It also feeds a vicious circle: as women leave research in greater numbers, research becomes less attractive to women. Attracting and retaining female researchers in a knowledge-based economy can only be reached if the full spectrum of gender bias and inequalities in research is addressed.

Economic benefits

There are different kinds of economic benefits. First, research is not only intensive in human capital, but also in funding. Universities and research organisations are engaged in a fierce competition to access public funding. Increasingly, this competition is organised and framed by funding agencies bound to the objectives of the European Research Area.

Along with other priorities, principles of Responsible Research and Innovation apply to the selection of successful applications. Within this framework, gender equality is increasingly referred to as an additional criterion to access public funding. This is clearly the case under the EU Work Programmes of Horizon 2020.

Therefore, addressing gender equality in research, but also adopting a gender lens in research content and outputs, can improve the competitiveness of universities and research organisations. Secondly, an increasing part of research is directly interested in producing an added value in terms of products, services and policy delivery.

Building gender-balanced teams, securing gender expertise and adopting a gender perspective in implementing and disseminating research work can bring specific benefits. A broader set of needs, expectations and usages is likely to be taken into account, and research outputs can reach a greater validity. New target audiences, beneficiaries or final users/customers can thus be reached by adopting a gender perspective.

Excellence and research quality

The quest for excellence and quality has become a major issue for research organisations and higher education institutions. It is driven by an intense competition for skills, funding and innovations. Bringing a [gender dimension in research and innovation content](#) improves the overall quality of research design, hypotheses, protocols and outputs in an ample variety of fields.

It does not only allow to address gender bias and to build more evidence-based and robust research, but also contributes to pluri-disciplinarity. As science and innovation are increasingly framed as working for/with society, reflecting the diversity of final users from the early research stage has become a must.

‘Gender blindness’ (understood as the lack of consideration for gender-related aspects) often goes with neglecting other relevant social or experiential parameters. Challenging this blindness, on the contrary, creates awareness for a broader set of variables than the sole sex and/or gender. Opposing excellence to integrating gender constitutes one of the most widespread resistances to gendering research organisations. For the above-mentioned reasons, it is thus key to outline gender sensitivity as a driver for excellence. In the case of lower intensive research and innovation countries (so-called “widening countries”), this argument should be linked to bridging the research and innovation gap, as gendering research provides additional opportunities for innovation as well as for research cooperation and funding.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the research

Building gender diverse teams helps securing a broader set of viewpoints, contributing to enhance creativity and innovation – and thus also the quality of research. Such teams promote inclusiveness, experiment more and share and create knowledge.

In addition, teams with a balanced number of women and men tend to perform better and to exhibit superior dynamics and productivity. Ensuring diversity in working teams (in terms of gender, race, nationalities, age, etc.) helps creating a supportive organisation, which improves its reputation, and contributes to retaining and attracting (new) talents. Check below some research undertaken in this field:

- Campbell, L. G., Mehtani, S., Dozier, M. E., & Rinehart, J. (2013). [Gender-heterogeneous working groups produce higher quality science](#). PloS One, 8(10), e79147
- Cheruvilil, K. S., Soranno, P. A., Weathers, K. C., Hanson, P. C., Goring, S. J., Filstrup,

C. T., & Read, E. K. (2014). [Creating and maintaining high-performing collaborative research teams: the importance of diversity and interpersonal skills](#). *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 12(1), 31–38

A leverage for organisational change

Pursuing gender equality requires to [involve all staff categories](#), including management, non-research staff and students, in a joint effort to produce change. As these categories only rarely collaborate, this overarching goal offers the opportunity for enhancing the sense of community and ownership.

Additionally, changes requested to achieve gender equality also bring benefits in terms of transparency and accountability, decision-making, career management and research evaluation procedures. Indeed, these procedures are often affected by different sorts of bias and unwritten rules which a concern for gender equality helps to challenge.

Changes needed to achieve gender equality and bringing a gender perspective in research require a longer timeframe to measure their effectiveness. Both shorter term and longer term impacts have to be pursued to ensure the mobilisation of research organisations over time and to make qualitative and quantitative evidences more salient. But these efforts in terms of monitoring can also be beneficial for a better knowledge of what makes organisational change successful or not.

Last but not least, addressing gender (in)equality can be part of a broader strategic process aiming at enhancing the competitive edge and national or international profile of the organisation.

Speech of Carlos Moedas, EU commissioner for Research and Innovation, (at occasion of Gender Summit 2015) emphasising and explaining the need for gender equality in research and structural change in research organisations:

Inés Sanchez de Madariaga, about why gender equality in Responsible Research and Innovation is relevant and what are the issues at stake:

Need inspiration?

Interested in more arguments for why work on gender equality and diversity in research is relevant? The Norwegian Committee for Gender Balance and Diversity in Research provides six key arguments on its website. These arguments deal with:

1) fairness; 2) democracy and credibility; 3) national research objectives; 4) research relevance; 5) research quality and 6) competitive advantage. Read the argumentation in full below.

Why work to improve the gender balance and increase diversity in research?

It is important to clarify the reasons for working for gender equality and diversity in an institution. The Committee for Gender Balance and Diversity in Research (2014-2017) gives the following arguments for its efforts to promote gender equality and ethnic diversity in academia.

Fairness

Gender balance and non-discrimination are a matter of fairness. Women and men, regardless of their ethnic background, must have the same opportunities to participate in, and the same power to influence, the higher education and research community.

Democracy and credibility

To have a well-functioning democracy, women and men, as well as various ethnic minorities, must participate on equal footing in all areas of society. If the community of researchers and research managers is more gender balanced and ethnically diverse, the institutions will more accurately reflect the diversity of the population. This will strengthen the institutions' credibility and ensure that they incorporate the research interests of a larger portion of the population.

National research objectives

To achieve national policy objectives for higher education and research, Norway must utilize all the human capital at its disposal. An imbalance in recruitment results in a loss of research talent. The various subject areas are still segregated by gender and tend to recruit a disproportionately low number of ethnic minorities. It is therefore essential that a gender and diversity perspective underlies the establishment and realization of national research priorities.

Research relevance

High-quality research that is relevant to society requires that research communities are able to raise the “right” questions and consider a number of different solutions. This is best ensured when research communities are open to different types of people with different experiences and have the ability to cooperate across and within disciplines. Research and education are integral to policy formulation and public administration, and contribute to a more critical, diverse and open public debate. When researchers reflect the diversity of the population as a whole, the credibility and relevance of research is enhanced.

Research quality

Heterogeneous research groups that include women and ethnic minorities have been shown to be more robust and innovative than homogeneous groups. This promotes quality and innovation in knowledge production. A focus on gender and diversity perspectives in research will enhance the quality of research as well.

Competitive advantage

Women comprise 50 percent of the talent that institutions compete for when recruiting to positions and academic communities in higher education and research. In addition, some people with a minority background are excluded for a variety of reasons. If women and ethnic minorities cannot be recruited, talent is lost and research quality is affected. This in turn weakens the competitive advantage of academic institutions as they work to develop their academic areas.

Source: [Committee for Gender Balance in Research \(Norway\)](#)

Want to know more?

- This [opinion paper on the benefits of gender equality in research organisations](#) lays out how the effectiveness of gender equality work can be optimised and which benefits can be expected for the organisation.
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Advocacy: speaking notes

Below are examples of ‘speaking notes’ to support **advocacy for gender equality**. These short notes (usually not longer than two paragraphs) aim to provide convincing arguments to progress gender equality in universities and research institutions. They can be helpful, for example, when you have to *convince a key staff member or colleague* in a couple of minutes of the benefits of work towards gender equality.

These notes are provided here for inspiration. They are tailored to **address different staff profiles including senior executives, managers, human resources teams**, etc. It is advisable to customise your own speaking notes and to make them fit your institution and the person(s) you will be addressing.

1. Addressing senior staff

International comparison

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In (country A), 70% of research organisations such as ours have set up a Gender Equality Plan, and their performance in dealing with gender equality is regularly assessed. They now consider investing on gender equality as a strategic issue and a matter of competitiveness and excellence. So do some research agencies, which included scores to that respect in their Reference Evaluation Frameworks. We should follow that example, and anticipate on future trends in (country B).

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Liability

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As stated by law, our institution is responsible for preventing and reporting on cases of sexual harassment. In accordance with EU directives, our national legislation has become very clear on this matter. We have reported cases of sexual harassment, but have no procedures nor skills to comprehensively deal with it. This is first of all terrible for the victims. But if we want to avoid potential legal liabilities, we should invest in prevention through dedicated procedures, mechanisms and staff training.

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Broader organisational change

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Our recruitment and internal evaluation procedures have been described as not being transparent by our policy authority. Meanwhile, our gender equality unit has detected gender bias in our recruitments and evaluations. Tackling the latter could be a good entry to challenge and upgrade our procedures!

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2. Addressing Managers

Valuing managers' contribution as agents of change

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Our institution has committed to high standards with respect to gender equality and our rector made a nice speech about this last week. And yet, without your knowledge of the organisation and of the people who work in it, we have no chance to succeed. You are the best placed to help us detecting room for improvements, and to co-create and test with us effective solutions.

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Internal stimulation

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Since our communication department adopted a gender-sensitive communication, our institution has been quoted as an example at the national level, female colleagues acknowledge that their work is better reflected and news about gender equality issues which are now more frequently displayed on the website are the most tweeted and shared on Facebook. It would be great to trigger the same dynamics in our departments and faculties and to engage in discussion with students.

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Referring to specific cases of management

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If we look at it objectively, the case of harassment we had to deal with last year has been extremely costly for us. The case was largely commented within and outside the institution, we appeared to be insensitive and not proactive and eventually our liability was mentioned in legal proceedings. We knew this could happen. Let's start dealing with this seriously, by securing expertise, investing on prevention, and providing assistance.

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Access to funding and competitiveness

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Attention to the gender dimension in research content, gender balance in teams, gender balance in decision making is extensively referred to in H2020 and this reflects in the current work programme. This could increase our competitiveness and our chances to be funded, to seriously tackle these issues in our proposals. Researchers should be involved in this process. We know about training sessions to support the integration of gender equality and a gender perspective in proposals. Let's create awareness among researchers and project managers.

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Internal synergies

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Our department of sociology has a rich record in supporting work-life balance among its academic staff. Did you know that a small fund was created to support childcare for those with parental responsibilities who wish to actively participate in international projects and conferences? It contributed to change the lens through which getting engaged in dissemination and other activities requiring mobility is perceived. Let's plan a meeting with their management and a few researchers to learn from their experience!

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3. Addressing Human Resources Management

Valuing Human Resources Management as core to any process of change

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Our institute applied under this gender equality scheme upon the initiative of our Director. We have taken a series of commitments and emphasised the work of our gender equality unit. Our chances to be selected are high. We have to be conscious that we are expected to challenge some of our processes, notably regarding recruitment and career management. Our Director and its team cannot make this change happen without the support, expertise and assistance of the Human Resources Management department. And no action related to career management can be planned and undertaken without your knowledge of the institution. Should we establish a pilot group with your department to diagnose needs and potential challenges with respect to gender equality? We might also foresee how this gender equality scheme can fit with your current modernisation efforts regarding Human Resources Management.

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Securing gender expertise to increase knowledge

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Our data collection is quite exhaustive about aspects such as hiring, career breaks, access to life-long learning, etc. But except for staff categories, we produce little sex-disaggregated data. And yet, we know that career opportunities differ for our male and female staff, depending on the types of position, the scientific discipline and other factors. These differences are regularly discussed informally during talks with social partners, and management meetings in each department. It would be more appropriate to carry out a proper diagnosis to start solving potential issues from the actual situation, not from subjective perceptions or standpoints. Producing such a diagnosis requires external expertise. We have plenty at hand at the department of gender studies, including people working on career management and gender equality in the workplace. Shall we convene a meeting on this?

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Challenging bias in recruitment and appraisal

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We are very selective about the profiles of applicants. We try to value different skills and experiences and still, we tend to receive less applications from female candidates, and our female staff have slightly lower chances to be promoted. I think we should put this under consideration in the next review of our process. Perhaps an external audit would be useful to identify potential gender bias? Are our job announcements appealing irrespectively of the sex of candidates? Do we pay enough attention to career breaks and to different experiences in research and research management? Let's clarify this.

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Improving work-life balance

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Work environments which pay greater attention to work-life balance are reported to attract more talented researchers and staff and to retain them longer. The quality of time spent at work is also meant to enhance productivity and work relationships. Last but not least, as men and women still have to cope with family duties to different extent, improving work-life balance can help women move up the career ladder and give their full potential. We have developed new tools to select and evaluate people, and to help them develop their skills. And yet, we have paid little attention to work-life issues. A survey or a forum could help us assessing whether this has had an impact, and to collect innovative ideas about gender-friendly work organisation.

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4. Addressing Researchers

Mainstreaming gender knowledge among researchers

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As a research centre carrying out research on climate change, we participated in the international conference held in Paris. Policy-makers and NGOs underlined the need to address prevention and mitigation of climate change impacts also from a gender perspective. This eventually materialised in the final agreement signed by 194 countries. We realised that nobody addressed this issue in our team, and that societal impacts of climate change in general were under-investigated at our institution. We learnt that cross-disciplinary workshops were organised by a local university to integrate gender in our fields of interest. We might consider hosting a session and strengthen our ability to address societal challenges and gender aspects in future project applications.

When planning our gender equality strategy, we realised that, across the university, gender was core to nearly 10 % of on-going PhD theses, and that gender was a relevant category for about 40 % of theses currently carried out. And still, outside from Social Sciences and Humanities related fields, we found little evidence of gender-sensitive research. Why could we not use the pool of knowledge accumulated in other fields or departments to irrigate other areas of knowledge? This would enhance transdisciplinary, inter-departmental cooperation and knowledge circulation. It might also benefit our success rate in accessing public funding, which tends to decrease with growing competition.

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Supporting women's contribution to knowledge production

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In a field like ours, laboratory experiments are time consuming, and international mobility is a pre-requisite for a successful career. Women might both be given less opportunities to contribute with their full potential, and discouraged by external factors – such as work conditions or selection and appraisal criteria to take their full share. If we do not change this, it is unlikely that our targets in improving sex balance in our institute will be ever met. More change is needed: we need to put in place active schemes to encourage women’s participation in collaborative projects, and also as project leaders. This implies making mobility more inclusive and less costly. It may also require offering both women and men better integration of career breaks or longer leave periods in their scientific careers.

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Awarding gender-sensitive research

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Let’s reward research projects or papers actively contributing to mainstream gender knowledge across academic disciplines. All fields should be encouraged to contest, and the call for participation should be put in a way that is appealing to researchers working also in technical fields. The same should apply to awards. The idea would be to make integrating gender an incentive for excellent and innovative research. Hence, awards do not have necessarily to be related to gender issues or research itself, but to the fields of expertise of applicants. This is working well elsewhere. Why not here?

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5. Addressing Social Partners

Improving working conditions through tackling gender inequality

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Gender equality is not only about complying with legal requirements or individual cases. It also sheds light on working conditions, all along the career path. Recruitment, appraisal, life-long learning, evaluation, career management tools: all these aspects can be considered from a gendered perspective and/or have (negative) gender impacts. Challenging gender bias can help us to challenge other bias about personal circumstances and unravelling intersecting inequalities.

Gender equality matters for all categories of staff, beyond traditional cleavages between permanent and non-permanent staff, academics and non-academics, etc. It is an objective that can create engagement, but also resistances which are better overcome if mobilising social partners. A gender equality unit can be perceived as external to social dialogue, but actually it can be an ally. As we are designing a Gender Equality Plan, we would like you to be a full part of the process, and share your knowledge about working conditions and work relationships with all mobilised stakeholders.

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Enhancing social dialogue by achieving gender equality

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It depends on contexts, but it happens that dialogue with trade unions and other staff representatives turns out to be quite formal. Be it framed by the Law and/or by a collective agreement, it does not always provide space for assessing the status of gender equality, nor to be innovative.

As we are launching what is meant to be a modernisation of our processes and ways of doing things with regard to gender equality, let's use this opportunity. Let's use it as a tool for modernising our social dialogue, and making it more inclusive. Besides, gender bias or prejudices rely upon deeply entrenched stereotypes. This requires new ways of sharing ideas and communicating with each other. Co-creation, experience-based or participatory techniques can help us to highlight problems and reach consensus about solutions.

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