

Gender Equality in Academia and Research

Austria

COUNTRY: Austria

PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY IN RESEARCH

Legal framework

The Federal Law for Equal Treatment in Federal Bodies stipulates affirmative action in areas where women are underrepresented and applies to Austria's 22 public universities. Non-university research organisations are covered by the Equal Treatment Act, which foresees gender equality rather than affirmative action. Between the end of 2014 and mid-2016, the then-Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection and then-Federal Ministry of Health and Women's Affairs jointly evaluated the instruments for enforcing equal treatment. The evaluation sought to shed light on numerous facets of the Equal Treatment Act and the Federal Act on the Equal Treatment Commission and the Ombudsperson for Equal Treatment. It looked particularly closely at experts' assessments of the effectiveness of existing regulations.

The Austrian University Act contains a number of laws pertaining to gender equality and covers all public universities in Austria. It defines gender equality as a guiding principle (§ 2) and as a task (§ 3) of universities. The triennial performance agreements between the universities and the Ministry for Higher Education (§ 13) must include measures to increase numbers of women in leadership positions and targeted support for female junior academics. All universities must develop a Plan for the Advancement of Women and an Equality Plan as part of its statutes (§ 19). They must also create an administrative unit to coordinate gender equality, women's advancement and gender research activities (§ 19). Additionally, universities must create an independent Working Group for Equal Treatment (§ 42), tasked with combating discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, religion, age, or sexual orientation. In 2009, a quota of 40 % women was introduced for collegial bodies, which was increased to 50 % in 2015 (§ 20a).

A new law on the proportion of women on the supervisory boards of listed companies and companies with more than 1,000 employees came into force in 2018. Such a supervisory board must now be made up of at least 30 % women and 30 % men.

Since 2021, the University of Applied Sciences Act (FHG) and the Private University Act (PrivHG) have obliged universities of applied sciences and private universities to develop and adopt gender equality plans (GEPs).

Policy framework

The government's Agenda for Research, Technology and Innovation (RTI) 2030 has three main objectives: (1) to reach the level of top international players and to strengthen Austria as an RTI location; (2) to focus on effectiveness and excellence; and (3) to focus on knowledge, talents and skills. The third goal includes the intention to increase the proportion of women graduates in technical subjects by 5 %. Intensifying gender equality programmes and measures in personnel and career planning will strengthen gender equality and diversity in research and development (R&D) and promote research careers for women. The associated pact for 2021-2023 operationalises these goals. It highlights as essential the establishment and expansion of targeted programmes for the advancement of women, as well as increased consideration of gender aspects in evaluating funding applications and in filling management positions. In its federal budget reform, the Ministry of Education, Science and Research (BMBWF) chose "gender balance in leadership positions and among junior academics" as its gender-related goal. Since 2014, it has submitted annual progress reports to the Austrian parliament. The Ministry for Higher Education defined two gender-related strategic goals to be implemented by the universities between 2013 and 2015: (1) improving numeric gender balance; and (2) closing the gender pay gap. For the period 2016–2018, the goal was for universities to develop a comprehensive understanding of gender equality. The performance agreements for 2019-2021 added promotion of a diversity-oriented equality policy to the existing objectives of cultural change, representation and integration of a gender dimension in research content.

Since 2012, impact-oriented budgeting requires federal ministries to determine gender equality outcomes for every societal aspect of their activities. The following impact targets and corresponding measures were defined for science and research for 2021: (1) increasing the proportion of women in RTI, including through support programmes and best practice models on reconciling family and career; (2) emphasising the visibility and role model effect of women in management and decision-making positions, supplemented by measures to develop evaluation criteria for funding according to gender-specific criteria; and (3) creating a balanced gender ratio in management leadership positions and committees, as well as among young scientists/artists. These measures implement the equality objectives in the performance agreement between the Ministry of Higher Education and the universities. They also seek to integrate gender into teaching and research content and to develop diversity management.

The Ministry of Digital and Economic Affairs, together with the Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG), is implementing w-fORTE^[1]. The project aims to improve career prospects for highly qualified women in research and technology by offering career coaching to female researchers and entrepreneurs in research and innovation (R&I), a quarterly Co-Create Careers Circle for (early-stage) researchers, and workshops on working in mixed teams. The first phase of w-fORTE INNOVATORINNEN^[2] took place from June 2020 to April 2021, among 21 female R&I researchers and practitioners who want to advance significant social or business ideas. The project seeks to increase the visibility of women in R&I and in creative roles.

The Laura Bassi 4.0 programme^[3] was initiated by the Ministry of Digital and Economic Affairs and implemented by the FFG. It consisted of two calls: the first call in 2018 targeted women wishing to shape digitisation, while the second in 2020 targeted organisations seeking to contribute to an equal opportunity digital future. The Laura Bassi 4.0 network on Digitisation and Equal Opportunity offers those seeking equal opportunity in digitisation the opportunity to contribute their experience, knowledge and energy.

Under the umbrella of the youngscience^[4] programmer, the Ministry of Education, Science and Research proposed a number of measures to encourage women into the fields of Mathematics, Information Sciences, Natural Sciences and Technology (MINT). In 2014, the Ministry commissioned a study on achieving cultural and structural change towards gender equality in higher education and research. It also analyses universities' publicly available gender monitoring data (Datawarehouse^[5]). In 2018, the Ministry published a report on gender equality in science and research in Austria, but this has yet to be updated.

FEMtech^[6] is run by the Federal Ministry for Climate Action, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology. The project aims to improve working conditions and career opportunities for women in research and technology, and to enhance gender equality in industrial and non-university research. More specifically, it seeks to increase the visibility of women in RTI and training. The project has compiled a comprehensive database of female experts in Austria, and the platform also offers current data on equal opportunities in research and technology. FEMtech network meetings facilitate informal exchange between gender equality experts, practitioners and women in RTI, as well as informing them about funding. The project supports small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in natural and technical sciences in their efforts to tackle equality-related issues. It also supports research-intensive companies to implement gender equality initiatives. FEMtech provides attractive internship opportunities for female students in innovation companies and non-university research institutes. Finally, it finances research projects aiming to improve gender justice in product and technology development (administered through FFG).

The Ministry has defined equal opportunity goals within the framework of the Human Potential Strategy 2030 for RTI. They include enabling equal opportunities on a structural level (e.g. dismantling and restructuring hierarchical structures, introducing quotas) and a discursive level (e.g. eliminating stereotypes, raising awareness).

Other stimulatory initiatives

The Ministry of Education, Science and Research (BMBWF) grants awards for gender research (Gabriele Possanner Award^[7]).

Since 2007, L'Oréal-UNESCO and the Ministry of Science have funded grants for female doctoral students and post-doctoral academics.

Every year since 2010, the Austrian Cooperative Research (ACR) has awarded a woman researcher from its technical and scientific network with the ACR Women Award^[8].

The [Käthe-Leichter-Preis](#)^[9] is awarded annually by the Chancellor's Office and other ministries for outstanding achievements in the field of women's and gender studies in various scientific disciplines. Since 2016, the Austrian higher education and research institutions have been awarded the [Diversitas-Preis](#)^[10] every two years by the BMBWF for innovative achievements in the field of diversity management. In addition, the BMBWF has hosted the networking platform [Diversitas-Werkstatt](#) every year since 2017. The platform brings together higher education and research institutions to share their experiences of diversity management implementation.

The Austrian Science Fund (FWF^[11]) embedded the national European Research Area (ERA) Roadmap goals on gender equality and gender mainstreaming in its 2019–2021 multiannual programme. It aims to use sustainable measures to engage researchers to support structural changes towards equality at national research institutions, and to integrate gender aspects into research approaches. The FWF strives for balanced participation of women and men in across all bodies, functions, processes and programmes. Its Equality and Diversity Strategy 2019-2020 was accompanied by an action plan, including the following measures:

- Expansion of equal opportunity monitoring (quantitative and qualitative);
- Further development of programmes and special measures to increase numbers of women applicants;
- Target of 50 % women on the FWF Board;
- Quality assurance in FWF procedures (dealing with unconscious bias);
- Awareness-raising and competence-building among the FWF Board (integration of gender dimension into research approach);
- GENDER research cost centre in FWF programmes.

The FWF's previous initiatives for women starting their careers (the Hertha-Firnberg Programme and Elise-Richter Programme) were replaced by the Early Stage Programme: Research–Innovation–Training^[12] (ESPRIT Programme) in 2021. The new programme boosts the careers of newly qualified post-doctoral academics conducting independent research at an Austrian research institution. Although no longer specifically targeting women, it nevertheless aims to promote excellent women in science.

The FFG strives towards gender balance among staff at all levels. It provides gender awareness training for employees and ensures that gender-sensitive criteria are used to evaluate project proposals (integration of gender in research content, as well as equal participation of women and men researchers). Under its “Talent” funding priority, the FFG supports various measures and projects to promote women in research and technology and to create equal opportunities, including the promotion of young students, support for researchers, and FEMtech (as outlined above).

Key actors

The BMBWF and the Federal Ministry for Climate Action, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology are both important national actors for gender equality in research and teaching. The Equality and Diversity Management Department of the BMBWF coordinates the legal gender equality stipulations, together with several stimulatory initiatives for higher education organisations. The Federal Ministry for Climate Action, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology is responsible for FEMtech. In light of its w-fFORTE and Laura Bassi projects, the Ministry of Digital and Economic Affairs can also be considered a key actor in gender equality in research and teaching.

The FFG implements gender mainstreaming across all work areas. It is responsible for the implementation of several gender-related initiatives (e.g. Laura Bassi, w-fFORTE, FEMtech, Talents programme). Its offer also includes workshops on GEPs and gender in leadership. Gender mainstreaming is implemented in all of its funding areas.

The FWF engages in gender mainstreaming activities to support the career development of women academics, including coaching women researchers and promoting gender in research. Its independent decision-making process was examined as part of the EU project, GRANTeD (GRant Allocation Disparities). That research project provides scientific support to the new [ESPRIT Programme](#) that focuses on analysing equal opportunities and gender bias in decision-making procedures.

INITIATIVES FOR GENDER EQUALITY BY RESEARCH PERFORMING ORGANISATIONS

All public universities in Austria are required by law to have an Equal Treatment Commission (which monitors discrimination), as well as administrative units coordinating gender equality, women’s advancement initiatives, and gender in research.

Austria's public universities have already put women's promotion plans and GEPs into practice. However, most applied science universities, private universities and non-university research institutions do not have GEPs. These are not yet required for non-university research areas or research funding institutions, but became obligatory for private universities and applied science universities in 2021.

Since the 1990s, all Austrian universities have been required by law to have a 'Plan for the Advancement of Women' as part of their statutes. From 2015, the University Act also requires public universities to develop an Equality Plan.

The Plans for the Advancement of Women typically contain detailed descriptions of the university's implementation of legal gender equality duties under the Federal Law for Equal Treatment in Federal Bodies and the University Act. They also outline how it mainstreams gender equality in decision-making, particularly in selection and promotion.

Numerous universities' GEPS outline further projects that exceed their legal obligations, such as gender budgeting or mentoring projects.

GEPs are developed by universities' Equal Treatment Commissions and, as part of the university statutes, officially adopted by the Senate. All university members (managerial, administrative and academic staff, students, other affiliates) are responsible for implementation of the GEP. The rector is often charged with undertaking specific tasks, which are explicitly highlighted in the GEP. In practice, universities' Equal Treatment Commissions and Gender Equality Officers coordinate implementation of GEPs.

GEPs are regularly updated in line with changes in the national legal framework or to reflect policy changes at the university. The Equal Treatment Commissions frequently involve other university actors in updating GEPs. This serves to increase awareness and commitment among other actors at the university.

Universities and non-university research organisations conduct a broad variety of gender equality initiatives, such as awareness of gender issues, gender budgeting, individual support measures (grants and/or coaching) for women academics, initiatives to improve women's networks, initiatives to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities, and to combat sexual harassment.

The Institute of Science and Technology (IST) Austria signed a performance agreement with the BMBWF that defines gender equality and diversity as important basic requirements for success. It focuses on training and awareness activities on gender and other biases in recruitment.

In its performance agreement with the BMBWF, the Austrian Academy of Science (ÖAW) committed to continuing its gender equality and diversity policies and establishing a non-discriminatory working environment. It also published its Women's Promotion Plan (2018–2020).

Several research organisations were or are part of consortia of EU-funded structural change projects, such as IFZ Graz (CHANGE), Central European University (SUPERA), TU Wien (GEECCO), Research Centre for Molecular Medicine of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (LIBRA), Danube University Krems (GENDERTIME), and Vienna University of Economics and Business (DIVERSITY). The Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS) is the coordinator and external evaluator of GEPs within TARGET. Other institutions are also evaluators in such projects, e.g. JOANNEUM Research (GARCIA, SPEAR, ACT and GENERA), Centre for Social Innovation (PLOTINA) and Institute of Science, Technology and Society Studies (GENDERTIME).

RELEVANT EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES

VRVis Zentrum für Virtual Reality und Visualisierung: GEP

The GEP developed and implemented by VRVis included concrete targets for structural and cultural change in the organisation. It sought to increase stakeholder and staff awareness of the underrepresentation of women at VRVis through training and internal information. It also targeted at least 25 % women researchers and an increased share of women in decision-making processes. The GEP measures were implemented in three areas: gender awareness/competencies (the basis for all other measures); communication (internal and external); and human resources (recruitment, induction, retention). The mix of measures were designed to bring about structural and cultural change as concepts and processes were changed by/during the implementation of the GEP.

In the course of implementing the GEP, VRVis realised the importance of including high-level decision makers to raise their awareness and ensure their genuine commitment to action. It acknowledged its own specific context, including not comparing its measures to those of other organisations, and focusing on one clear relatable objective rather than gender equality terminology. Finally, VRVis became aware of the importance of flexibility to react to current needs.

TU Wien: Funding consultation on the gender dimension in research

The project was initiated to help researchers to define the gender dimension within their research. The Gender Competence Department of TU Wien advises researchers on how to integrate the gender dimension when applying for research funding. The university seeks to generate more successful proposals and research funding, as well as increased awareness and competence in respect of gender-related topics.

Two central administration institutions cooperate to implement the measure – the Research Funding Support and the Department of Gender Competence. Research Funding Support organises information events for specific calls, or general coaching for project proposals six to eight times a year. Scientists have the opportunity to ask questions and receive individual support, as well as being introduced to the offer of consultation support on integrating the gender dimension in research. This is complemented by online resources and studies on gender research.

The Gender Competence Department meets with the Deans of TU Wien to raise awareness of gender issues outside research funding and to encourage faculty leaders to make use of the advisory service. Customised workshops are also organised for project groups, based on their specific concerns, questions and conflicts.

The consulting service has been well received and has garnered greater acceptance for diversity and gender-related topics. Using research as a means of overcoming resistance and rejection could usefully be applied to other equality actions, as it is rational rather than emotional. It also has the benefit of increasing awareness of diversity and gender in research generally.

Austrian Science Fund (FWF): Equal Opportunity Monitoring

The FWF published its Equal Opportunity Monitoring, as recommended by the Ministry of Digital and Economic Affairs. The measure seeks to increase the participation of women researchers in Austria since 2015.

The monitoring is part of the FWF's action plan on changing structures. Published each of the past two years, it presents a visualisation of facts and data to bring to life the insights in the annual report. Data on applications from women and men, funded projects by gender, and applications by subject are already collected as part of the FWF Dashboard. Staff from the Department of Strategy, Policy and Evaluation then compile the Equality Opportunity Monitoring. Following presentation at the annual press conference in March/April, the data are discussed with the Assembly of Delegates and the Supervisory Board and then published on the website.

New FWF employees are trained on the importance of gender equality, including the data collected. All employees are updated annually, while the Gender Working Group communicates the content to individual departments.

The visualisations and increased awareness have smoothed the implementation of regulations, such as the quota in the ESPRIT Programme.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.bmdw.gv.at/Services/Foerderungen/fForte.html>

[2] <https://www.ffg.at/en/service/w-fforte-economic-stimuli-women-research-a...>

[3] <https://www.ffg.at/en/program/laura-bassi-40-programme-0>

[4] <https://youngscience.at/de/>

[5] <https://unidata.gv.at/Pages/default.aspx>

[6] <https://www.femtech.at/en/femtechs-database-female-experts>

[7] <https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/HS-Uni/Gleichstellung-und-Diversit%C3%A4t...>

[8] <https://www.acr.ac.at/awards/woman-award/>

[9] <https://www.bundeskazleramt.gv.at/agenda/frauen-und-gleichstellung/prei...>

[10] <https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/HS-Uni/Gleichstellung-und-Diversit%C3%A4t...>

[11] <https://www.fwf.ac.at/en/>

[12] <https://www.fwf.ac.at/en/research-funding/fwf-programmes/esprit-programme>