

Gender Equality in Academia and Research

Estonia

COUNTRY: Estonia

PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY IN RESEARCH

Legal framework

The Gender Equality Act^[1] was adopted in 2004 and last amended in June 2014. It includes several references to the promotion of gender equality in research and innovation, as outlined below.

§ 10. Promotion of gender equality in education and training

“Educational and research institutions and other organisations delivering training shall ensure equal treatment of men and women in vocational guidance, education, professional and vocational development and re-training. The curricula, study materials used and research conducted shall facilitate the abolishment of unequal treatment of women and men and promote equality.”

§ 11. Employers as promoters of gender equality

“(1) Upon the promotion of equal treatment of men and women, an employer shall: 1) support that both women and men apply for vacant positions and that persons of both sexes are employed to fill vacant positions, 2) ensure that the number of women and men hired to different positions is as balanced as possible and ensure equal treatment on their promotion, 3) create working conditions which are suitable for both women and men and enhance the reconciliation of work and family life, taking into account the needs of employees, 4) ensure that employees are protected from gender-based harassment and sexual harassment in the working environment, 5) inform employees of the rights ensured by this Act, 6) regularly provide relevant information to employees and/or their representatives concerning equal treatment of women and men in the organisation and measures taken to promote equality.”

“(2) An employer shall collect sex-disaggregated statistical data concerning employment that allow, if necessary, the relevant institutions to monitor and assess whether the principle of equal treatment is complied with in employment relationships. The procedure for the collection of data and a list of data shall be established by the Government of the Republic by a regulation.”

The Equal Treatment Act^[2] entered into force in 2009 and was last amended in May 2017, includes the following clause:

“§ 13. Educational and research institutions and other entities and persons organising training shall, upon determination of the content of studies and organisation of studies, take account of the need to promote the principle of equal treatment.”

More generally, the work of research institutions is regulated by the Organisation of Research and Development Act^[3] and the Higher Education Act^[4]. Neither act contains specific regulations on gender equality.

Policy framework

The Research and Development and Innovation Strategy 2014-2020, “Knowledge-based Estonia”^[5], was launched by the Ministry of Education and Research in 2012. Of the four measures, “Measure 1. Ensuring the high level and diversity of research” deals with gender equality: (1) develop a career model that supports business and individual development, encourages occupational mobility and promotes research and engineering; (2) open competition for academic roles to foreign researchers; (3) monitor gender balance in recruitment, grant funding and representation on decision-making bodies.

The Ministry of Education and Research is now preparing the follow-up Research and Development, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Development Plan 2021–2035^[6]. Covering education, research, youth and language policy, it will seek to make better use of Estonia’s high-quality education and research and development (R&D) systems to benefit people, society and the economy. The related action plan will promote a flexible academic career model that considers gender equality, diversity and stability.

Developed by the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Welfare Development Plan 2016–2023^[7] focuses on the strategic policy objectives of the labour market, social protection, gender equality and equal treatment. It contains the sub-objective “Men and women have equal rights, obligations, opportunities and responsibilities in all social sectors”. The proposed policy instruments include legislative drafting, outreach, training and analysis. Activities are targeted at the general public as well as specific target groups and institutions, including employers, educators, legal professionals and policymakers.

The Estonian Research Council (ERC) was founded by the Ministry of Education and Research. The ERC’s Gender Equality Plan (GEP) 2020–2027^[8] has five main objectives:

- Raise gender awareness among employees of the Council, its panels and committees;
- Adhere to the principles of equal treatment;
- Improve gender balance on panels, committees and reviews;
- Improve gender balance among applicants and recipients of research grants, awards and funding;
- Implement a gender-sensitive communication strategy.

The Science Communication Strategy 2020-2035 “Estonia knows”^[9] was developed by the ERC. It notes that gender stereotypes influence young people’s educational and career choices, inhibit economic growth, and create gender gaps. Estonians in general have very clear gender-stereotyped attitudes to women and men’s roles. Similar values are held by teachers and thus impact young people’s world views and career choices, with young men more likely to choose science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) careers. These are the fastest-growing economic sectors in the EU, the drivers of innovation and economic growth, and they are facing acute – and worsening - labour shortages. Gendered education and career choices are thus detrimental to society – horizontal segregation inhibits economic growth, wastes human resources, diminishes the country’s competitiveness, costs the State, and fuels inequalities.

The Strategy seeks to raise awareness among teachers, career advisors (including adult educators and specialists at the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund) and youth workers of STEM career opportunities and gender stereotypes. It also aims to support stereotype-free career choices.

Other stimulatory initiatives

The Family-Friendly Employer Label^[10] is an initiative of the Ministry of Social Affairs, supported by the European Social Fund (ESF). Since 2016, numerous organisations have received a bronze, silver or gold label, depending on the extent to which they accommodate employees' work-life balance. Almost none of the Estonian educational or research institutions have ever participated in the initiative. Gender equality can be found in two of the Label's assessment categories. The first is "synergy and culture" (silver level), which examines measures to encourage reconciliation of work and family life for women and men. The organisation's strategic documents are assessed for activities to ensure gender equality, such as equal pay for women and men in comparable positions, or equal participation of women and men at different levels of management. The second category is "work commitment and engagement" (gold level). It looks at the organisation's promotion of gender equality, including the introduction of measures to reduce the gender pay gap, such as transparent pay system, allowing/encouraging paternity leave, gender balance in management.

Key actors

The Ministry of Education and Research^[11] implements the national research policy, organises financing and evaluation of the activities of R&D institutions, and coordinates international research cooperation. It is also responsible for planning, coordination, execution and monitoring of policies on the activities of universities and research institutes. In addition, it is charged with implementing gender equality policies in public research. The Minister of Education and Research is advised by the Research Policy Committee.

The Ministry of Social Affairs^[12] coordinates equal treatment (sexual orientation, age, disability) and prepares the relevant legislation. It designs and implements appropriate policies that directly promote gender equality.

The ERC^[13] supports research and innovation in Estonia. It maintains and develops a balanced, high-level and internationally successful research, development and innovation (RDI) system, as well as a knowledge-based and sustainable Estonian society.

INITIATIVES FOR GENDER EQUALITY BY RESEARCH PERFORMING ORGANISATIONS

From 2014 to 2016, four Estonian universities (Tallinn University, University of Tartu, Tallinn University of Technology, Estonian Business School) participated in “Development of the career model of researchers in order to support women’s career paths”^[14]. The project was supported by Norway Grants 2009-2014 for Mainstreaming Gender Equality and Promoting Work-Life Balance. Led and piloted by Tallinn University, it aimed to map the key conditions for gender-sensitive recruitment and promotion to establish a programme to support the careers of young women researchers. More specifically, it looked at mechanisms and key factors to promote career planning for young (women) researchers. It considered not only young scientists but also those responsible for recruitment and career promotion. The project also examined gender equality in the four universities and engaged the institutions’ structures (human resources, various leaders) to carry out monitoring tasks.

Educational and research institutions are obliged to ensure equal treatment of employees. To date, however, only the University of Tartu has its own guide to the principles of equal treatment. University representatives state that it was completed because the institution came under public scrutiny. Approved in 2016, the guide clarifies the nature of unequal treatment and provides guidelines to resolve such situations. While the underpinning laws offer general principles for identifying situations of unequal treatment, the University of Tartu Code gives specific examples of such situations. An update was planned for 2020. The University itself acts as an advisor-chaplain to mediate and resolve conflict, including related to equal treatment.

The Marine Institute of the University of Tartu prepared a GEP following its involvement in the Baltic Gender project^[15]. The plan describes and gives examples of gender discrimination. It provides an overview of the Estonian Maritime Institute's gender equality situation and its improvement strategy.

Specific documents on gender equality and equal treatment have only recently been developed in several institutions. These are now being debated and agreed. Changes can stem from qualitative data collected by relevant surveys, often as a result of formal regulations on gender equality and equality issues linked to international funding programmes (Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe). Despite few cases of gender inequality, general awareness of unequal treatment has improved and stakeholders understand the need for regulations and supports to address gender inequality.

The Estonian University of Life Sciences does not have a separate strategy for equality and gender equality. However, in December 2020, it adopted a provision on the implementation of the principles of good academic practice, which mentions the importance of equal treatment.

Similarly, the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre has recently created and updated documentation on equal treatment. Its procedure is quite general in nature, stating that “appropriate measures” are used for information activities, complaints are processed “within a reasonable time”, and cases from up to three months ago are resolved.

Tallinn University of Technology is currently drafting a separate document on regulating gender equality.

At the beginning of 2020, the Estonian Academy of Arts adopted a Code of Ethics approved by a Senate decree. It emphasises that all university members are to be treated equally, regardless of gender or other characteristics.

The principles of equality and gender equality do not appear in the documents of Tallinn University. Given its research focus, however, its development plan repeatedly mentions the value of diversity and notes that the development of cultural competence is necessary in a globalised world. This suggests that securing, safeguarding and respecting cultural diversity is considered a priority.

While universities may have formulated the principles of gender equality in specific documents or regulatory guidelines, other R&D institutions do not include the principles of equality in their significant documents. Several national institutions adopted the Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, which makes gender equality one of the values of good science, promotes equal treatment of staff, and establishes procedures for dealing with unequal treatment (including bullying and harassment). Equality and non-discrimination do not appear explicitly in institutions’ high-level operational documents. That exclusion suggests that experience or awareness may be lacking, perhaps because these institutions have very few staff (even fewer academic staff), or because gender-based inequality has yet to surface in workplace satisfaction surveys. This may also explain why the principles of equal treatment are overlooked in operational documents, as such guidelines often follow cases^[16] that have drawn public attention.

RELEVANT EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES

Code of Conduct for Research Integrity of Estonian Universities

This Code was launched in 2011 by the Rectors' Conference. It represents all universities in Estonia and specifies the duties and tasks to be undertaken by participating higher education institutions (HEIs). Section 10 of the Agreement refers to the implementation of the European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers (which includes gender equality principles). Universities recognise the main principles of the Charter and the Code, and commit to improving their human resources in line with the general principles, requirements and values to develop research careers and an attractive, sustainable and open labour market. The practice has remained declarative and there are no tangible results as yet.

University of Tartu: guidelines for equal treatment^[17]

The guidelines provide an overview of equal treatment and workplace bullying. They offer employees and students clear instructions on reporting violations of the principles of equal treatment and describe the procedure to resolve discrimination and bullying cases.

Estonian Marine Institute of the University of Tartu: GEP 2019–2023^[18]

The Estonian Marine Institute was invited to participate in the Horizon 2020 project "Baltic Gender", which aimed to promote gender equality in marine research institutions. One specific measure was the development of (voluntary) GEPs in all partner institutes. The general goal of the GEP is to promote equality through institutional change in order to optimise human capacity to address the growing challenges of the marine environment.

ERC: GEP 2020–2027^[19]

The ERC's GEP aims to ensure equal opportunities for all women and men researchers. It seeks gender equality in all of its activities and supports all researchers, regardless of their gender (or their sexual orientation, nationality, age, other personal characteristics). The ERC believes that society will benefit most from science when researchers are diverse and the research itself considers gender aspects.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/126042013009>

[2] <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/503052017002/consolide>

[3] <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/503062019008/consolide>

[4] <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/525062020001/consolide>

[5] https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/59705_teadmistepohine_eesti_e...

[6] https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/taie_arengukava_kinnitatus_15.07.2...

[7] https://www.sm.ee/sites/default/files/content-editors/eesmargid_ja_tegev...

[8] <https://www.etag.ee/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Estonian-Research-Council...>

[9] https://www.etag.ee/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/ETAG_Eesti-teab_strateegi...

[10] <https://www.tooelu.ee/en/Employer/Supporting-campaigns>

[11] <https://www.hm.ee/en>

[12] <https://www.sm.ee/en>

[13] <https://www.etag.ee/en/estonian-research-council/>

[14] <https://www.tlu.ee/et/ytirasi/Teadustegevus/Teadlaste-karjaarimudeli-are...>

[15] <https://www.baltic-gender.eu/>

[16] Estonian Research Council, Current situation of gender equality and ways of its improvement in Estonian science, Final report, 2021, https://www.etag.ee/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Sooline_vordoiguslikkus_E... (in Estonian).

[17] <https://www.ut.ee/et/vordse-kohtlemise-juhend>

[18] https://mereinstituut.ut.ee/sites/default/files/mereinstituut/emi_soolis...

[19] <https://www.etag.ee/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ETAg-soolise-v%C3%B5rd%C3...>