

Gender Equality in Academia and Research

Netherlands

COUNTRY: Netherlands

PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY IN RESEARCH

Legal framework

The Higher Education and Scientific Research Act was published in 1992 and contains several references to discrimination. Article 1.3.5 states that “higher education institutions [HEIs] shall also pay attention to the personal development of their students and the promotion of their sense of social responsibility. The promotion of social responsibility shall include, at a minimum, that institutions, including those who formally or informally represent them, refrain from discriminatory conduct and statements.” Articles 9.32 and 10.19, on the general duties and tasks of the council and council members of universities and universities of applied sciences, state that “the council shall also guard against discrimination on any grounds whatsoever in the university in general and in particular shall promote the equal treatment of men and women as well as the inclusion of persons with disabilities or chronic illnesses and people with a minority ethnic background.”

Policy framework

In 2020, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) formulated a “National Action Plan for Greater Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education and Research”. The Plan was signed by the Dutch Research Council (NWO), the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU), the Dutch Network of Women Professors (LNVH), the Expertise Centre for Diversity Policy (ECHO) and the National Network of Diversity Officers (LanDO). It was also endorsed by the PhD Network Netherlands (PNN) and PostdocNL.

The National Action Plan aims to create an inclusive, diverse and safe learning and working environment in Dutch higher education and research. It calls on the higher education and research sector to work with the government to take the next step towards full diversity and inclusion.

The Plan includes five goals for 2025:

Embed diversity and inclusion more effectively in existing instruments, for example, in assessments of research proposals and accreditation;

Monitor diversity in higher education and research better and more widely, including perceived social safety and inclusion;

Establish an award system to promote diversity and inclusion in policy and funding;

Encourage cooperation by consolidating and supporting institutional diversity plans;

Establish a national centre of excellence on diversity and inclusion to develop, consolidate and share knowledge and expertise.

A National Advisory Committee^[1] will advise the OCW and the Dutch field of higher education and research on monitoring and attaining these goals. The Committee is funded by the OCW.

The Ministry and the higher education and research field are committed to the five goals in the short and longer term. The OCW, NWO, VSNU, KNAW, LNVH, LanDO, ECHO, PNN, and PostdocNL have indicated their willingness to accept the Committee's recommendations and take concrete steps towards achieving the goals.

Other stimulatory initiatives

In 2017, the OCW provided additional funds for the appointment of 100 women professors. The *Westerdijk Talent Impuls* initiative aimed to increase the share of women professors. Universities were encouraged to promote women researchers to full professors and were offered compensation for the extra salary entailed. One of the conditions for approving the application for financial compensation was that the professor in question should have permanent employment prospects. Over EUR 5 million in funding was made available, with the NWO tasked with dividing the funds. In 2018, 100 women professors were appointed.

Average growth in the percentage of women professors has consistently increased in recent years, reaching a peak of 2.2 % growth in 2018, when funds were made available under the *Westerdijk Talent Impuls* to appoint 100 women professors in addition of the targets universities themselves had set. This growth dropped to 1.1 % a year later, suggesting that specific targeted actions are necessary to accelerate change.

The *Aspasia* grant was set up by the NOW, together with the OCW and the VSNU. It is designed to encourage the promotion of women Vidi grant recipients to associate professorships and women Vici grant recipients to full professorships. For women academics evaluated as “very good” or “excellent” after the selection interview for Vidi or Vici, but were not awarded a grant, universities may receive a grant if they promote these candidates to either an associate or full professorship. The premium available for the promotion of each Vidi/Vici grant recipient is EUR 40,000. The premium offered for the promotion of Vidi/Vici applicants that were assessed as “excellent” or “very good” but did not receive the grant is EUR 120,000. Thus the latter group does not receive a grant under the NWO Talent Programme, but is awarded a larger premium under *Aspasia*. The premium is allocated to the executive board of the university or institute where the *Aspasia* candidate is promoted. The executive board can use the premium to cover the extra salary costs resulting from the promotion, add it to the research budget of the *Aspasia* laureate, or supplement the Vidi/Vici grant (if applicable). The addition to her budget will give the candidate the possibility to expand her research (e.g. appointing an extra post-doctoral or research assistant, temporarily suspending her teaching activities, and/or undertaking a period of research at an international university). The *Aspasia* programme may therefore encourage other women academics to apply for grants.

Created in 2008, the “Talent to the Top Foundation”^[2] facilitates and encourages the government and other employers to recruit, promote and retain women at the top of organisations. The Charter is a public commitment, a code with clear agreements to realise gender diversity at top and sub-top management levels. Employers, businesses, organisations and institutions commit themselves to clear, measurable gender diversity goals and allow their achievements to be monitored annually. Signing the Charter is a voluntary commitment.

The LNVH^[3] began life informally in the 1990s and became a foundation in 2001. It is now a network of over 1,400 women professors and associate professors, representing every discipline and all Dutch universities. Its goal is to promote the proportionate representation of women in academia. In 2012, the LNVH created the Distinguished Women Scientists Fund for women post-doctoral academics working in the Netherlands and within three years of their promotion. The Fund provides a travel grant of up to EUR 1,500 for women wishing to travel abroad in the framework of their discipline.

“Girls’ Day” is an annual event where technological companies, research and educational institutes open their doors to young girls aged 10-15 years in order to awaken their interest in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). It is run by the Dutch National Expert Organisation on Girls/Women and Science/Technology (VHTO) to increase the participation of girls in science, technology and ICT in the Netherlands. During Girls’ Day, more than 9,500 girls discover the world of science, technology and IT. More than 300 companies organise hands-on activities, tours, workshops, quizzes, contests, pitches and speed dates with women professionals for girls in primary and secondary education.

The NWO uses the annual Athena Award to showcase women role models working in (natural) scientific disciplines. Researchers can nominate one or more women researchers for the Athena Award.

Key actors

The “National Action Plan for Greater Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education and Research” ensures that the OCW is a key actor in driving change in the higher education and research sector.

Funding initiatives rest primarily with the NWO, which organises funding and selection procedures. Evaluation committees typically consist of peer reviewers employed by Dutch or foreign universities. In 2020, the NWO produced two videos on inclusive assessment (on the written assessment of proposals and on assessment committee meetings), giving reviewers and assessment committees specific suggestions to optimise evaluation processes^[4].

At local level, the promotion of gender equality in research is entirely at the discretion of the universities themselves. Universities’ boards are responsible for the strategic plans, which often include gender equality and diversity. Diversity Officers at the universities are the main actors in implementing gender equality measures.

INITIATIVES FOR GENDER EQUALITY BY RESEARCH PERFORMING ORGANISATIONS

Dutch universities are committed to creating a safe, inclusive and diverse working and learning environment in which everyone is equal and has equal opportunities. They are taking steps together, such as ensuring a diverse student and staff population.

Most universities in the Netherlands have set up gender policies and strategic plans. Horizon Europe has specified Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) as an eligibility criterion for public bodies, research organisations and higher education applicants. Dutch universities are now incentivised to develop their GEP.

The National Advisory Committee has prepared a guideline^[5] on developing a GEP. HEIs can use the guide to create a GEP that meets EU requirements, as well as taking its additional recommendations. As of 1 September 2021, three universities have published a GEP that meets the Horizon Europe criteria. Other universities are in the process of developing such a GEP, as is the NWO.

Diversity measures taken by universities in the Netherlands have mainly focused on women (students and academic staff)^[6]. For example, all universities have published targets for women professors in order to prevent women talent from being under-utilised, especially in higher-level positions. These targets have led to an increase in the numbers of women professors at universities in the period 2015-2020. Targets have also been set for 2020-2025 – should these targets be met, no university will have less than 25 % women professors by 2025.

A number of the measures proposed and/or implemented refer to an increase in hiring and promoting women academics. Several universities have a programme or fellowship that aims to hire or promote women, such as a tenure-track for assistant or associate professors, or a chair for full professors. Other hiring measures include gender-sensitive approaches to selection and recruitment (e.g. toolkit developed by the Erasmus University Rotterdam)^[7].

Bonjour, Van den Brink and Taartmans (2020) examined the diversity and inclusion policies at Dutch universities and argued that most measures aim to fix the numbers. Although a slight shift towards institutional change can be observed, few measures target real inclusion or structural and cultural change. The policies currently in place do not include intersectionality or intersectional measures. The majority of the plans do not present concrete measures, deadlines and responsibilities, making it difficult to monitor or evaluate their impact. The authors concluded that diversity and inclusion policies in universities will improve when clear deadlines, objectives and responsibilities are agreed and documented.

Diversity Officers

Most universities have at least one Diversity Officer, nominated from among the academics or professionals who work in the field of diversity and inclusion. Others instead entrust the diversity portfolio to the Board, which is supported by a team or task force. Some universities also have Diversity Officers at faculty/department level.

The duties of a Diversity Officer include raising awareness of diversity and inclusion, creating and developing diversity policy, encouraging cultural change, identifying and stimulating initiatives that promote diversity and inclusion, monitoring and reporting, and setting up and maintaining a network. Interviews with Diversity Officers revealed that most experience little formal or informal power (Bonjour, Van den Brink & Taartmans, 2020). They also report having too little time and too few resources to perform their work.

RELEVANT EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES

Gender in Research Fellowship (Netherlands Organisation for Health Research and Development – ZonMw)

Quality healthcare requires integrating a sex and gender dimension in all aspects of health research and clinical practice. ZonMw and the Erasmus Summer Programme (ESP) offered a joint programme to further knowledge and skills in gender, health and research, through “Gender in Research” workshops and a “Gender and Health” course.

The ZonMw “Gender and Health Knowledge Programme” provided up to 20 Gender in Research Fellowships each year for (inter)national PhD students and post-doctoral researchers. The fellowships allowed them to participate in the “Gender in Research” workshops and attend the “Gender and Health” course of the ESP. The programme took place in 2018, 2019 and 2021. Due to COVID-19, the 2021 course was delivered online.

Irène Curie Fellowship Programme (Eindhoven University of Technology)^[8]

In the summer of 2019, the Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e) began its Irène Curie Fellowship (ICF) Programme. The Programme opened up academic jobs exclusively to women applicants for six months in a bid to achieve a greater balance between women and men in academic positions. Although widely supported, the measure also met with some criticism. In May 2020, it was halted following a ruling by the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights (*Het College voor de Rechten van de Mens*, CRM), which stated that TU/e's approach of opening up jobs exclusively to women was disproportionate. Since the start of the ICF Programme, 57 women have been hired as permanent academic staff at TU/e: four full professors, two associate professors and 51 assistant professors. In addition, 63 men were hired. This means that the growth in the number of women in academic positions at TU/e doubled, which was an unprecedented shift.

The ICF Programme resumed on 1 May 2021, with the same goal of having women make up at least 30 % of academic staff by 2024. Its new format has been endorsed by the CRM, going so far as to provide room for customisation in job groups where the numbers of women academics are far behind. Within the adjusted ICF Programme, 30–50 % of permanent academic jobs will be offered. For each position that becomes vacant, the existing gender ratio will be taken into account. If the percentage of women is less than 35 %, the vacancy will be considered for inclusion in the ICF Programme. The Programme will run until at least 2024 and will be evaluated annually.

As an Irène Curie Fellow, women receive a five-year tenure-track position as assistant professor. After a maximum of four years, a decision is made on tenure. If women already have a more senior profile, they can apply as associate or full professor. As an Irène Curie Fellow, women are offered the opportunity to establish an independent research programme in collaboration with colleagues at the university, and at national and international institutions. They are also expected to contribute to the curriculum of the department. Fellows receive a substantial start-up package to start their research and, for example, hire a PhD candidate.

National Dialogue Network of Diversity Officers

In 2016, Leiden University took the initiative for a National Dialogue Network of Diversity Officers. The main goal is to create a platform of knowledge and experience related to the development and implementation of policies on diversity. In addition, the network can serve in an advising, agenda-setting and strategic function in the development of policies at national level. Almost all Dutch universities are represented.

Addressing harassment in academia

In 2019, the LNVH initiated a research project and published the report “Harassment in Dutch academia: exploring manifestations, facilitating factors, effects and solutions”, which started a national debate on all forms of harassment in Dutch academia. The report prompted universities to create an ombudsperson position, for example, and a flowchart outlining how to report someone or file a complaint. The theatre “#MeTooAcademia: the Learning Curve” was an innovative way of addressing the topic, featuring a post-play discussion of harassment in academic. The actors have been asked to perform the play by numerous HEIs and governmental organisations.

Participation in EU projects

Radboud University is part of a consortium in the EU-funded structural change project, “Gender Equality Actions in Research Institutions to traNsform Gender ROLES” (GEARING-Roles). Erasmus University Rotterdam is part of the Horizon 2020 consortium, EQUAL4EUROPE, which aims to develop and implement GEPs in European universities. Wageningen University and Research (WUR) is a partner in the four-year Horizon 2020 Gender-SMART project (2019–2023). Together with six European partners, WUR has committed to strengthen and consolidate gender and equality.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.dihoo.eu/>

[2] <https://talentnaardetop.nl/en>

[3] <https://www.lnvh.nl/>

[4] <https://www.nwo.nl/en/inclusive-assessment>

[5] <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2021/06/15/handreik...>

[6] Bonjour, Van den Brink and Taartmans, “Een diversity officer is niet genoeg: Het diversiteitsbeleid op Nederlandse universiteiten”, TH&MA, Vol. 27, No. 5, 2020, pp. 83-89.

[7] <https://www.eur.nl/en/media/2021-04-engbrochurewstoolkit21112018en>

[8] <https://www.tue.nl/en/our-university/departments/biomedical-engineering/...>, <https://www.tue.nl/en/working-at-tue/scientific-staff/irene-curie-fellow...>