

INTEGRATING GENDER EQUALITY INTO RPOS AND UNIVERSITIES

Workshop bias sensitising

University Graz, Coordination Centre for Gender Studies/Research and Equal Opportunities

Austria - 2010

OVERCOMING BIAS IN PERSONNEL SELECTION PROCEDURES

Summary

As part of the internal leadership training programme of the University of Graz, the gender equality office is organising since 2010 an annual *bias sensitising workshop*. This workshop aims at creating reflexivity about gender and other discrimination-related biases in personnel selection procedures and at creating a general understanding that equality and quality are mutually reinforcing goals. The training takes place over two half-day sessions of five hours each. It is facilitated by external experts, as well as university-internal gender equality experts. In this workshop, participants gain knowledge about diversity issues, societal inequalities, and academic evaluation procedures. They also participate in a simulated personnel selection procedure, as well as discussions on academic curricula vitae, to trigger reflection about their own selection criteria, prejudice and biases.

The need of becoming aware of gender biases

An extensive body of academic research shows that selection procedures for academic personnel are shaped by gender bias. Gender bias in personnel selection is based on effects of homophile and male networks, as well as on gender stereotypes and masculine imagery of the ideal academic. In order to counter these effects, several gender equality measures have been put in place in Austrian universities. Most extensively, equal treatment commissions have been created in every university, whose main task is to monitor personnel selection procedures (especially professorial appointments) and file complaints if they suspect discrimination. However, the effects of gender bias can be very subtle and hard to detect, and often, those whose decisions are gender biased are unaware of the socially constructed gender stereotypes and contextual conditions that shape their opinions. In order to increase awareness for this subtle and invisible mechanism, which perpetuates gender inequality in academia, the University of Graz is conducting since 2010 a bias-sensitising training module as part of their general leadership training programme. The main goal is to improve the overall quality of personnel selection procedures.

Bias sensitising workshop

This training is anchored in the university's Plan for Women's Advancement, which prescribes that the rectorate has to organise regular events for information and training about gender mainstreaming, particularly for leadership personnel.

The bias sensitising workshop aims to address a particular problem: contribute to the understanding that the goal of equality which goes hand in hand with the goal of quality and excellence. Considering that the identity, and the main task, of universities and academics is to conduct high-quality teaching and research, gender equality, when understood as contradictory to this aim, can be

perceived as illegitimate. If the main criterion for decision-making in personnel selection procedures is to identify the candidate who is of the highest quality and best fit for the job, then criteria that take into account other issues, such as for example gender equality, are often seen as misplaced in these procedures. This training effectively counters such perceptions: it shows that what is believed to be a bias-free, objective decision is actually strongly shaped by societal beliefs and inequalities. This training therefore improves the quality of decision-making by increasing awareness of such bias. More generally, it shows that it is not equality, but rather inequality, which is contradictory to quality. Besides making participants aware of their own and others' bias in decision-making, this training also aims at a wider transformation in the understanding of equality and diversity work.

This training is targeted at members of academic personnel at the university, who fulfil internal administration duties as members of committees in decision-making bodies. It takes place over two half-day sessions of five hours each, with about one month in between these sessions. The first session focuses on diversity, as well as on the effects of expectations and societal inequalities on evaluations and decisions. It is facilitated by a trainer from the Austrian Society for Diversity, i.e. external to the university. This first session consists of an input about diversity issues and bias effects, and it promotes reflection and discussion. The second session focuses on the formation of scientific reputation and the practice of evaluating academic curricula vitae. It is facilitated by members of the university's equal treatment commission, the university's coordination centres for gender studies/research and equal opportunities, as well as an external expert specialised in academic consulting. This session mostly consists of a group exercise. In this exercise, participants take the role of evaluators in a mock selection procedure. The candidate profiles are designed so as to contain CV elements which reflect the most common evaluation biases of different underrepresented groups, including a number of gender specific career trajectories such as, for example, childcare time. In the ensuing discussion and reflection, participants discover that what they thought were neutral and objective evaluations are actually shaped by bias.

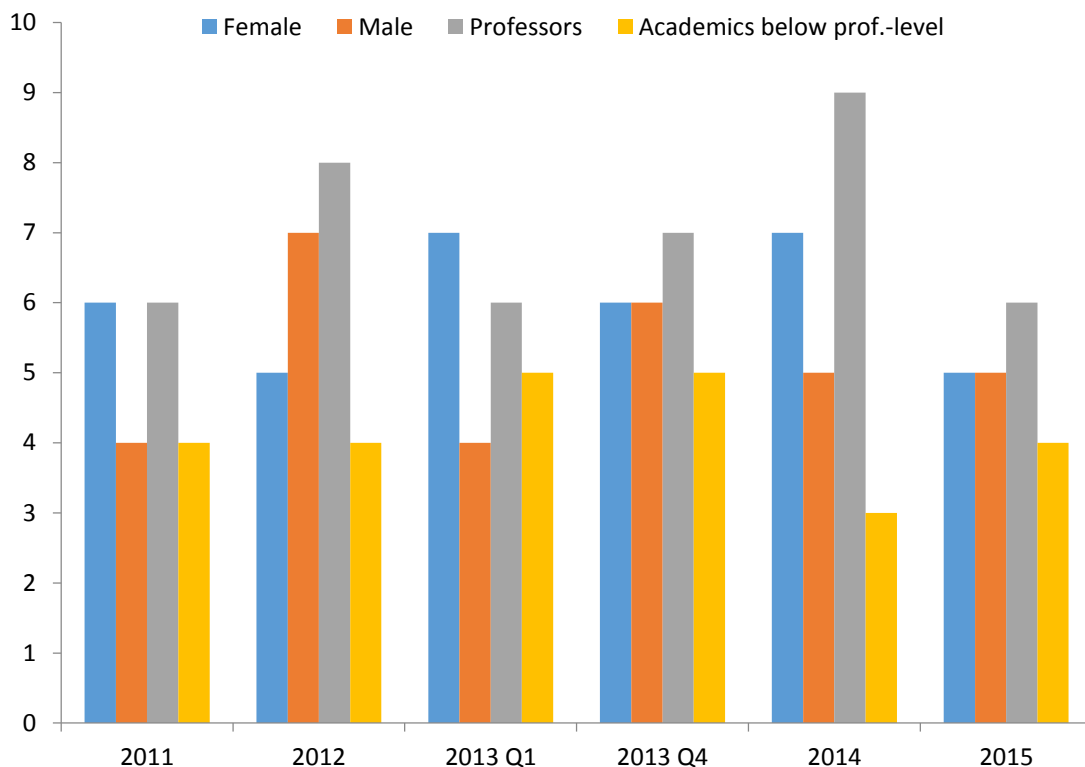
Ensuring a broader participation

In 2010, the Coordination Centre for Gender Studies/Research and Equal Opportunities of the University of Graz, as part of their awareness-raising and gender-training activities, developed a workshop to tackle gender bias in personnel selection procedures. This workshop was later integrated in the general training programme for academic leadership personnel in 2013 as an optional module. This change substantially widened the participation in the training. The bias sensitising workshop is not understood as a specific gender equality activity. It is rather conceptualised as a means for improving the quality of personnel selection procedures, and therefore attracts academic personnel who would normally not participate in gender equality and diversity activities. An additional measure towards promoting participation in this module was initiated by the equal treatment commission of the University. Since 2009, collegial bodies by law have to fulfil a gender quota, and the equal treatment commission can veto the composition of these bodies if the quota is not fulfilled. Since 2011, the equal treatment commission refrains from filing such complaints if some of the male members of these bodies have taken part in the training module. To sum up, four steps were critical to widen the attendance to this workshop:

- The workshop was integrated as an optional module in the university's overall training programme for leadership personnel. This lifted the training from an isolated gender-specific activity to an integral part of leadership development.
- Attendance in the training can be brought forward as a justification for not fulfilling the legally prescribed gender quota for decision-making bodies.
- The training is explicitly framed not as an equality activity, but as a measure towards increasing the quality of decision-making.
- Because of the high quality of the training, and particularly because of the revelatory character of the group exercise (mock evaluation procedure and reflective discussion), word-of-mouth of participants created a high reputation and attractiveness of the workshop.

Since 2013, the possibility to participate in this training has been extended to other universities (through the payment of a fee). For instance, the personnel of the Danube University of Krems has been participating in this training on a regular basis.

Over the last years, the participation rates have been quite constant.





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FURTHER INFORMATION

Workshop flyer (in German):

<http://static.uni-graz.at/fileadmin/Koordination-Gender/Gleichstellung/ABS.pdf>