

# Women, research and universities: excellence without gender bias

## Executive summary

A powerful and internationally competitive research base is essential to ensure Europe's vitality; it in turn is dependent on Europe's capacity to attract and retain highly skilled and creative researchers. LERU (2010) has previously shown how universities and others can create and enhance attractive employment conditions, career perspectives and support for researchers- men and women. The present paper focuses on women in academia because more women than men drop out of research careers, resulting in an underrepresentation of women in leading positions, a loss of talent for society and a lack of diversity in the workplace, each of which presents a potential threat to the search for excellence in research.

While progress has been, and is being, made, in reducing gender inequality, change may come about slowly and is subject to significant variation according to country, research field and other factors. In examining the factors involved in gender inequality we highlight four well-known and -evidenced challenges regarding women in research. First of all, academia in Europe is still losing a considerable amount of its female research capacity. From the PhD (45% females) onwards, women drop out at successive turns and for various reasons, albeit with discipline-/country-specific exceptions. Only 13% of heads of higher education institutions in Europe are women.

Secondly, women progressing in an academic career may face (un)conscious bias against their qualifications as excellent researchers. Often relatively small or less obvious in individual cases of selection or promotion, at a group level or in the course of a career, the effects of bias become more significant. In other words, many mole hills together may become a large mountain.

Thirdly, there are financial considerations such as gender pay gaps, which manifest themselves in academe as they do in other labour sectors. It is important to note that on the whole women tend to receive less funding through research grants.

Fourthly, a different type of challenge is the lack of an appropriate gender dimension in research design, implementation and organisation. It can result in serious flaws with potentially harmful effects, e.g. in medical research, thus limiting scientific excellence, creativity and benefits to society.

Since there is abundant evidence to document these challenges, this position paper does not dwell on them extensively. Instead we aim to stimulate change: LERU universities commit themselves to undertake action, we examine what LERU and other universities can do to produce structural change and we share the experience of what LERU universities are doing to attract and support women in research careers.

Specifically, the LERU universities have decided to undertake a commitment:

- to promote gender diversity among their academic staff with strong leadership, in conformity with institutional, national and other regulatory frameworks and in partnership with the LERU universities.
- to develop or continue to implement Gender Equality Strategies and/or Action Plans, to share them and to jointly monitor their development and implementation.
- to engage with EU policy makers, funders and other actors to promote the cause of gender equality at universities.

Having analysed the specific challenges that women face in the course of their academic careers, we identify four priority areas in which universities can usefully undertake gender actions.

### **A first priority for action is in the area of leadership, vision and strategy. We argue that:**

1. A strong commitment from the university's leadership should underpin all gender-related actions.
2. This commitment should be operationalised by a Gender Strategy (or Action Plan), which is often set within the wider realm of equality and diversity policy.
3. Universities should set up dedicated processes and structures to coordinate the Strategy or Plan and manage gender activities.
4. A commitment to gender should be backed up with the necessary funding. Funding considerations should aim at structural change, enable longer-term planning and consider attractiveness for researchers at all career stages.

### **A second action area covers the types of measures universities can take to achieve structural change:**

5. Universities need to select the right mix of measures in accordance with their institutional and regulatory

situations and target these at certain career phases as needed.

6. Measures can be adopted as (usually) gender-specific career development measures and (usually) gender-neutral work-life balance measures.
7. Measures should be aimed at achieving structural change.

**A third imperative is for universities to consider how to implement and ensure effective uptake of measures taking into consideration that:**

8. Successful implementation requires transparency, accountability and monitoring of gender equality at universities.

**A final action area aims to address the lack of a gender dimension in research. We recommend that:**

9. Universities should actively promote and support a gender dimension in research, taking into account the specificities of particular research fields.

Universities need to be able to decide which mix of policy decisions, measures and processes best fulfills their needs in view of the institutions' overall strategies and national or other gender and diversity agendas. Since these vary widely across Europe, it is impossible to have identical goals or measures across all universities, even within such a similar group as LERU universities. One-size-fits-all solutions are in most cases inappropriate and unlikely to be successful. The appendix of this paper contains a wealth of examples of and references to LERU universities' policies and initiatives, which we share as a source of good practice and inspiration for universities and other interested parties.

Since universities' actions are in many cases regulated or influenced by governments and research funders, it is clear that our recommendations have implications for other actors and are in some cases dependent on their actions. Our recommendations to universities, funders, governments and publishers can be summarised as follows:

**Universities should:**

- Commit at the top and throughout the institution to gender equality.
- Develop or implement a Gender Strategy and/or Action Plan with the support of all divisions and levels within the university. It can be embedded in a broader Equality Strategy and should be managed professionally, possibly through a dedicated structure such as a Gender Equality Office.

- Aim to ensure sufficient funding for all gender equality activity. Funding structures should enable long-term planning of gender equality activity to achieve structural change.
- Select the right mix of gender-specific career development measures and gender-neutral work-life balance measures.
- Pay attention to transparency, accountability and monitoring to ensure successful implementation and improvement where needed.
- Promote and support a gender dimension in research, taking into account the specificities of particular research fields.

**Funders of research should:**

- Develop their own gender strategies or action plans.
- Consult regularly with universities on gender-related funding issues.
- Ensure selection boards are gender-sensitive.
- Promote or demand a gender dimension in research projects.
- Monitor the results of funding gender actions.
- Provide longer funding periods that make research careers more attractive.

**Governments should:**

- Consult regularly with universities about how to best attract and retain women in research careers.
- Avoid overly prescriptive or regulatory approaches, working instead with positive incentives.
- Collect, disseminate and learn from national and international good practice.
- Establish effective mechanisms for collecting gender-disaggregated statistics.
- Develop or maintain monitoring of gender policies, which requires gender-sensitive statistics on resource assignation, distribution of time and space, access to information, and other areas.
- Establish specific measures to evaluate and monitor actions aimed at achieving effective parity and equality in universities.

**Academic publishers should:**

- Ensure that an appropriate gender dimension in research is embedded in their science policies.