

ENHANCE GENDER EQUALITY IN DECISION-MAKING IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH PERFORMING INSTITUTIONS:

What can be done?

Based on the experience of the European project (Horizon2020) CHANGE (2018-2022), this policy paper aims to offer some recommendations to stakeholders to enhance gender equal decision-making processes and bodies. This document is the result of the exchange and sharing of ideas and know-how of CHANGE's implementing partners and from the joint reflection on the processes and lessons learnt during the project implementation. It also integrates the recommendations and exchanges carried at the national stakeholder workshops as well as during the international stakeholder workshop. The CHANGE achievements reveal that institutional policies and gender initiatives have a key role in building more gender-friendly and balanced work environments in Research Performing Organisations (RPOs), including in decision-making processes and bodies. Therefore – in order to mitigate gender gaps that still persist in decision-making – recommendations and inspiring practices with potential to be adopted by RPOs in diversified contexts (national/institutional) are presented

Introduction

Gender inequality in science has been a concern in the European Union (EU) for many years and its elimination is currently among the top priorities of the European Research Area (ERA). Despite the progress that has been made in recent decades, legislative and political efforts have not yet been sufficient to eliminate gender inequalities. In RPOs, progress is slow and challenging and inequalities tend to persist, not only in governance structures, but also in terms of vertical and horizontal segregation (European Commission 2019, 2021; Cheung 2021).



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Gender mainstreaming policies have been playing an important role in promoting processes of institutional change in Europe (Osborn et al. 2000; Rees 2001; Dewandre 2002; Casaca and Lortie 2017). Although definitions of gender mainstreaming policies varies, it is usually consensual to refer to it as “the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action ... in all areas and at all levels” (UN ECOSOC 1997/2). However, in RPOs, Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) are currently one of the main tools for fostering gender equality (ERAC 2021; Mergaert, Cacace and Linková 2022). The European Commission (EC), mainly through its previous research and innovation support programmes (FP6, FP7, Horizon 2020), has funded several projects aimed at implementing GEPs - such as the European project CHANGE (2018-2022), supported by the Horizon 2020. A GEP is defined as a set of actions aimed at identifying gender inequalities and bias, designing and implementing measures to correct these, and setting targets and monitoring progress via indicators (EIGE,2016).

The CHANGE project aims to create and implement tailor-made GEPs in RPOs. Based on its significant experience, this policy paper aims to offer some recommendations to stakeholders on enhancing the gender equal decision-making processes and bodies in RPOs.

The structure of the policy paper is as follows: Section 2 frames and contextualises the problem; section 3, dedicated to the CHANGE project, addresses the specificities of the CHANGE implementing partners regarding to the gender in/equality in decision-making processes and bodies and presents some good practices to enhance gender equal processes and bodies. Section 4 presents recommendations to stakeholders on how to enhance gender equality in decision-making and section 5 reports to the main conclusions.



FRAMING THE CONTEXT – BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM DESCRIPTION.

The concerns of the EU about gender equality in science and technology emerged in the 1980s, although the nodal point in the definition of European policies to promote women in science has occurred in the end of the 1990s (Carvalho et al. 2020), a period that coincided with the development of the European Technology Assessment Network (ETAN) report (European Commission 2000). This report, published in 2000, made clear that – despite differences between countries – women held fewer than 10% of the top positions in the academic systems, although they made up more than half of the student population across Europe (European Commission 2000, Dewandre 2002: 278).

In the following years/decades, the European Commission sought to promote gender equality in science and higher education through a gender mainstreaming strategy complementary to the legal approach of equal treatment and positive action measures. Gender in/equality concerns were also incorporated in the successive European Union funding framework programmes, and several initiatives were developed to trigger and/or accelerate lasting structural and institutional changes towards gender equality, including in RPOs - Research Performing Organisations.

The under-representation of women in decision-making positions and in top positions in higher education and scientific systems has been gradually reduced over time but, more than 20 years after the publication of the ETAN report (European Commission 2000), it still tends to remain consistently low, as shown in the latest SHE Figures report (European Commission 2021). According to this report - published every three years since 2003 - women made up only 26.2% of full professors (Grade A) in the EU-28 in 2018 and, in the field of engineering and technology, they represented only 16.9% in that professional rank. Also, the proportion of women leading higher education institutions remains low: in 2019, they were only 23.7 % in the EU-28 (European Commission 2021). This continuous under-representation of women in decision-making positions in academia limits the pool of talented people, constrains scientific excellence, is socially unfair and has been identified as one of the causes why the lack of gender equality in science has become entrenched (European Commission 2000, Pastor et al. 2014, Carvalho et al. 2020).



ABOUT THE CHANGE PROJECT

GENDER EQUALITY IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES AND BODIES: THE CHANGE CASE

At the beginning of the CHANGE project, through analysis of each implementing partner, it was confirmed that there were strong gender asymmetries in the decision-making bodies and processes in the five implementing partners (Carvalho, Zélia and Diogo 2018; Diogo et al. 2021). In order to overcome the existing gender imbalances, initiatives/actions were developed throughout the project in order to fill the identified gaps and trigger lasting structural and institutional changes in this field. The actions, defined by each implementing partner, were designed taking into account the context and reality of each country and institution in order to meet their specific needs. In total, 89 short, medium and long-term actions were implemented in the framework of institutional GEPs in the five implementing RPOs.

These actions are very important for the sustainability of CHANGE in decision-making bodies and processes and their accomplishment was only possible due to the cooperation of the Transfer Agents (TAs) of all institutions and the co-produced gender equality knowledge of CHANGE. At the end of the project (2022), data on gender equality in decision-making processes and bodies was again collected (Carvalho, Jordão and Diogo, forthcoming). This exercise revealed that, during the implementation of the project, in global terms, gender balance in decision-making bodies increased in all the CHANGE implementing partners (Table 1), although with relevant differences - which evidences the success of the initiatives adopted. In all the partners, with the exception of NIB, the increase in gender equality was achieved by an increase in the number of women. Since at NIB women were initially the majority, the balance was increased by an increase in the number of men participation in decision-making bodies.



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Table 1: Women's representation in the decision-making bodies of CHANGE implementing partners (2018 and 2022)

Decision-making bodies	Women's representation 2018 2022	Variation (2018-2022) (%, average)
IFAM (Germany)	5% 7%	+2%
BBC (Israel)	42% 43%	+1%
UAVR (Portugal)	33% 45%	+12%
UNIZA (Slovakia)	15% 24%	+9%
NIB (Slovenia)	68% 60%	-8%

Source: Carvalho, Jordão and Diogo (*forthcoming*)

It should be noted, however, that the improvements recorded have not occurred in a linear or homogeneous way, and that the proportion of women in decision-making bodies varies not only among institutions but also among different bodies in each implementing partner (e.g., governance bodies, management bodies, scientific and pedagogic bodies, advisory bodies). More detailed information on each implementing partner can be found at the "Report on gender equal decision-making processes and bodies" (Carvalho, Jordão and Diogo *forthcoming*), available on the CHANGE website.

GOOD-PRACTICE EXAMPLES FROM CHANGE IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

Based on the experience of the CHANGE project, it was also possible to identify some inspiring practices to enhance gender equal processes and bodies:

- Using existing mechanisms or establishing new institutional structures to support gender equality

Diversity Group

The Diversity group was created at IFAM. It is perceived as an effective and supportive measure to increase gender equality in decision-making bodies and processes. In this group several people from the management, the human resource department and the scientific and technical staff are included. There is a direct exchange between the different levels and through its composition there is direct access and thus also influence on the level of the head of the institute.



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In this way, members of the group can present the measures to the management in different ways. In addition, within the group, measures are considered from different and diverse perspectives and thus possible challenges can be minimised.

Commission of Ethics and Equal Opportunities (CEEEO)

In NIB Commission for Ethics existed many years and at the beginning of 2022 was rearranged to CEEEO. The CEEEO is an institutional body in charge of GEP implementation and ensuring equal opportunities for all staff members. CEEEO is composed of 6 members - 4 scientist and two lawyers (one of them is also team member of CHANGE project). Chair of CEEEO is a female scientist, while vice-chair is a female lawyer. Structure of CEEEO ensures variety of knowledge and that requests to CEEEO will be solved in the best possible way by applying different knowledge, experiences and approaches.

Sounding Board (SB)

The SB is an advisor and monitoring team created by the UAVR team at the beginning of the CHANGE project. It is constituted by key people in the institution, with high political and symbolic power. It helped design the actions to improve gender equality adequate to the institutional environment, and therefore improved their acceptance in the community.

Ambassador for equal opportunities

UNIZA established the role of the ambassador for equal opportunities, held by one of the vice-rectors. Through this role, the GE policies at UNIZA have been institutionalized. The ambassador oversees implementation and evaluation of the GEP, participates in the meetings of the actors responsible for the particular GEP activities and informs the UNIZA top management about the progress in gender equality.

Gender Equality Officer (GEO)

In the case of BBC, the already existing institutional GEO was assigned as the college's Transfer Agent (TA) and BBC team leader in the CHANGE project. GEO, or Presidential Advisor for Gender Equity, is a formal position in higher education institutions in Israel since 2014, based on a government resolution regarding a reform in the management of human resources in civil service including the inclusion and promotion of women (Salomon & Getz, 2019). The CHANGE project provided the BBC GEO with resources, knowledge and support to boost the gender issue in the college, and thus make it significantly visible not only on institutional but also on a national level.



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- Development of formal and informal trainings and awareness activities

Top management training

At UNIZA unconscious bias training for the top management (including the rector, all the vice-rectors, deans, etc.) was designed and implemented as a part of its regular meeting (meeting of the Rector's Advisory Group), what ensured the attendance of all its members.

Brown bag sessions

Brown bag sessions are informal meetings aimed at increasing gender awareness and disseminating the CHANGE project. This initiative was developed at UAVR. It allowed the creation of Informal supportive networks.

Informal networks

Actively search for potential female candidates before any election, convince them to stand for the position and support their application/proposal.

- Communication and dissemination activities

Making gender equality visible

At BBC, due to the fact that women constitute the majority of the college's staff, special effort was required to raising awareness towards the gender issue and to explaining why it is not a "non-issue", and how gender biases are common to everybody, women as well as men. Therefore, the gender issue was made visible through dissemination of newsletters, website updates and news reports, GEP activities and gender mainstreaming in as many forums and organisational initiatives as possible and to different groups of stakeholders. This constant discourse enabled the diffusion of the gender perspective to the managers' awareness, showing them that gender equality is a cross-cutting issue which is relevant to many other topics within the organisation.



Gendering culture and language

The gender perspective in the organizational 'culture and language' was included in consensual areas at BBC, such as teaching and education. As BBC is a teachers' training college, it was quite easy and natural to initiate gender mainstreaming in teaching contents, and through these activities to deliver messages regarding gender equality and equity in other aspects to the management. For example, a gender and tolerance awareness week, during which 20 lessons about gender in a variety of courses were given by BBC lecturers, demonstrating how gender can be a crosscutting issue in all disciplines, not necessarily gender studies. Another example was incorporating a 'gender mainstreaming spectrum' in BBC syllabus template which was disseminated to the staff at the beginning of the academic year. This spectrum defines various degrees of gender mainstreaming in the BBC various courses – from one gender-related component (such as a lesson, a paper, gender-sensitive language, etc.) to an entire course dedicated to the subject. Academic staff members were instructed to examine how the gender dimension can be included in their teaching content and methodologies. For further examples of including the gender dimension in BBC culture – see Himi et al. (2022).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the experience of the CHANGE project and on the results achieved, some general recommendations can be made:

1. Involve in gender equality institutional policies **key actors** with power who are engaged with the issue (e.g., TA) and also invite gender specialists to improve gender awareness within the institution.
2. Include the **gender equality topic in the institutional agenda** whenever possible, especially in relevant moments of the institution (e.g., elections for the governance bodies). Besides increasing gender awareness among the candidates, it will allow to induce public commitment of the potential winner to develop mainstreaming policies to improve gender equality along his/her mandate.
3. **Raise gender awareness**, especially of those who have institutional power, through training and awareness-raising activities, both formal and informal. For this, it is essential: a) to have a good knowledge of the institution and how it functions and b) to have data on the situation of the institution in terms of the gender composition of its decision-making bodies; c) to be aware of scientific knowledge produced about women and power in HEIs, as well as of evidence of institutional policies and practices that have worked in other contexts.



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4. **Create Communities of Practice (CoP)** and internal structures/groups committed to gender equality issues (academics recognised by their peers, professional or student representatives, gender aware colleagues, sister projects, ...).
5. **Disseminate data** and information related to gender equality and communicate regularly with the various stakeholders, namely with institutional decision-makers, seeking to stimulate their involvement in gender initiatives and providing them with regular information on the work developed in this area.
6. Identify and/or define **legal, economic or financial incentives/obligations**. This type of demands/incentives are those with more weight and pressure capacities because they help to convince top leaders in the institutions of the relevance of the topic and give them legitimacy to act in this area, placing the gender topic on the institutional agenda.

Other recommendations resulting from knowledge exchange with stakeholders are also relevant, namely:

1. **Set targets and/or objectives** on different levels and associated with different fields of knowledge. It is important to define the objectives to reach in the medium and long term in terms of gender composition of decision-making bodies and monitor the achievement of these objectives or targets.
2. **Demystify leadership**. Top management position in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are associated with a leader role. However, these roles are also usually related with the dominant masculinity. To deconstruct this association it is suggested to include in the job description some flexibility and even allow for part-time possibility.
3. Include **gender balance** in decision-making as a criterion for **state funding of HEI**. Include institutional gender equality indicators in the funding formula for HEIs.



4. Integrate the **equality** issue into **Quality Assurance & Evaluation processes**. The same is true for the evaluation of institutional quality. Gender balance in decision-making processes should be taken into consideration in institutions quality assurance and evaluation.
5. **(Re)think decision structures and leadership roles** in order to design more gender sensitive forms of decision-making. Taking into consideration the gender effects in all the decision-making processes and results.
6. Include mandatory **gender equality training** as a criterion for access to decision-making positions and bodies. More than having more women in decision-making positions, it is important to have people who are gender aware. To assure this it is important to include gender equality training as mandatory for all the potential candidates to decision-making bodies.
7. Stimulate **mentoring and role models** (at institutional and national level). Having role models increases commitment to an academic career and participation in decision-making bodies; mentorship experience is a high incentive to apply for a position in a decision-making body.

CONCLUSION

GEPs constitute a unique opportunity to define measures at institutional level to overcome the gender imbalances that tend to persist in the decision-making processes and bodies in RPOs. In the EU, these plans have become dominant and are now an eligibility criterion for accessing Horizon Europe funds (ERAC 2021).

The experience of the CHANGE project reinforces the importance of the GEP in promoting cultural and institutional changes towards greater gender equality. The results achieved show that the initiatives carried out have the potential to increase gender equality in decision-making processes and bodies. However, progress has been made at different rates in each of the implementing partners.



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The experience of the CHANGE project enabled us to identify six relevant and interconnected recommendations for stakeholders to increase gender equality in decision-making processes and bodies. They are related to the institutional power and engagement of the actors involved, to the centrality of the gender theme in the institutional agenda, to the promotion of gender awareness, to the membership in CoPs, to the dissemination and disclosure of gender related data and also to legal, economic and financial obligations/incentives.

However, one must not forget that these initiatives must always consider the context and specific reality of the RPO where they will be implemented and also that they must be integrated in a broad, transversal and articulated strategy.

To achieve a greater presence of women in decision-making bodies, it is also important to take into account some factors, which can facilitate the implementation of the actions. Informal mechanisms and talks, teamwork and networks, and the commitment and support of TAs are the three most relevant factors identified by the CHANGE implementing partners (Carvalho, Jordão and Diogo forthcoming).

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