

How research institutions work to improve gender equality and diversity in their own organisations – current and future

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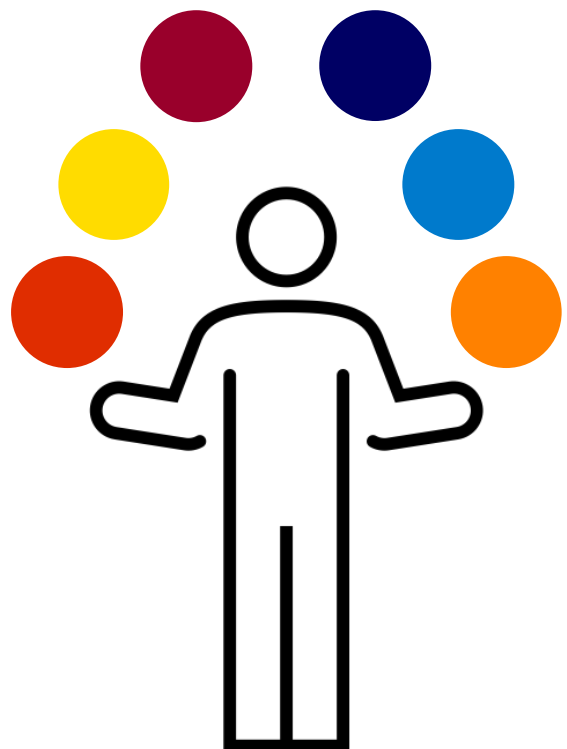
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What are the key organisational measures that can be taken to improve gender balance and diversity in the higher education and research sector? In this policy note, we address the organisation of gender equality and diversity efforts in the sector and give some recommendations for advancing this work.

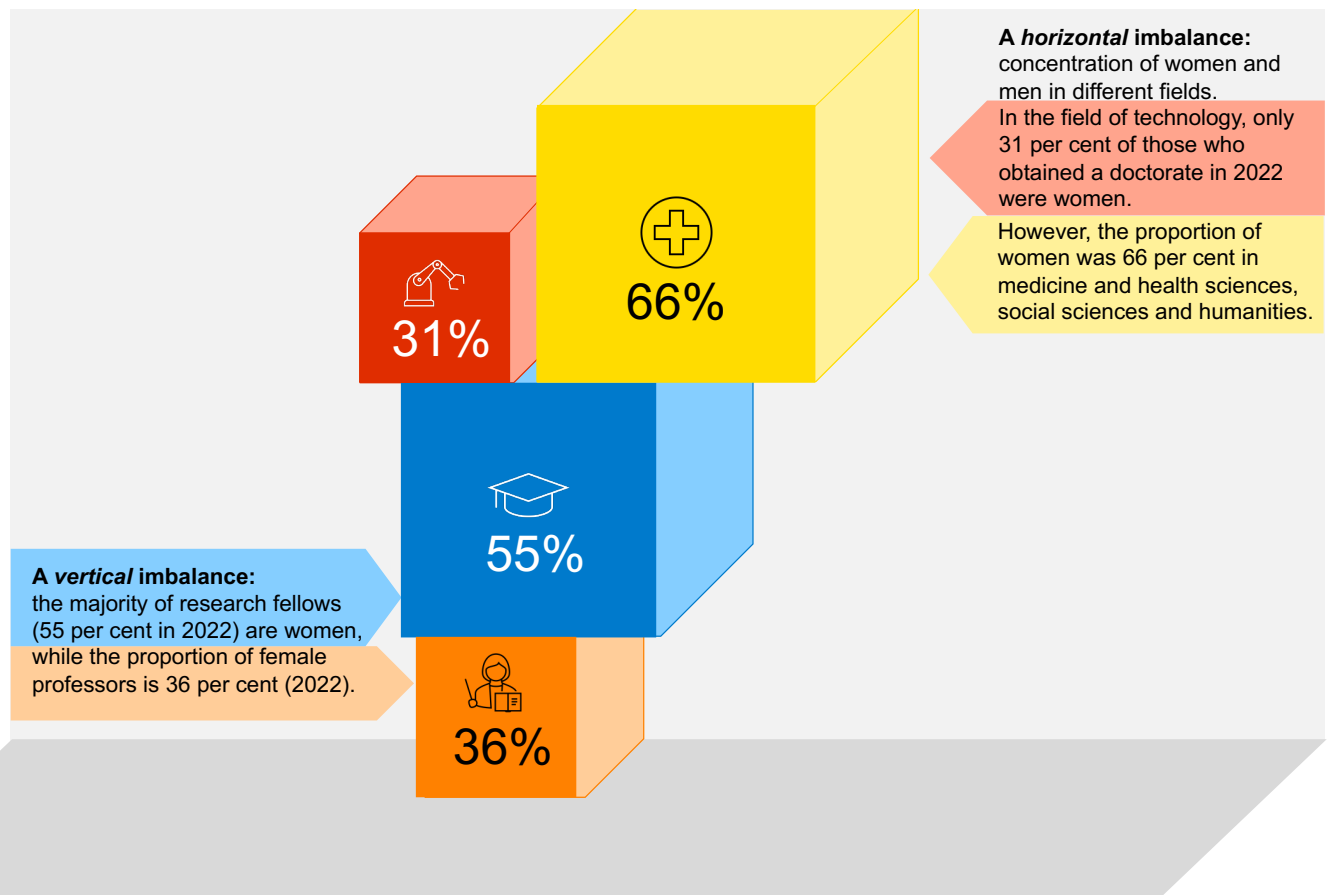
In 2022, the Work Research Institute (AFI), represented by senior researchers Cathrine Egeland and Ida Drange, conducted a qualitative study on gender equality and diversity efforts at five research institutions, consisting of two research institutes, a vocational university college and two universities. The study was commissioned by the Committee for Gender Balance and Diversity in Research (KIF Committee).

The data for the study consisted of transcripts from interviews with equality and diversity advisers, managers and academic staff, as well as various documents (reports, strategies, action plans) providing insight into current efforts in gender equality and diversity and the opportunities and challenges that may be relevant for future work.

Findings from the study are summarised in an AFI report on the scope for gender balance and diversity, which describes the gender balance and diversity efforts in higher education and research institutions (Egeland and Drange, 2022). An article based on the study is also being written.



Starting point: gender imbalance and lack of diversity



Source: Statistics Norway/research personnel (preliminary figures for 2022)

The institutions in the higher education and research sector are characterised by a lack of gender equality, diversity and inclusion.

In terms of gender imbalance, this does not only refer to a vertical imbalance where the majority of research fellows (55 per cent in 2022) are women compared to 36 per cent (2022) of professors; it also involves a horizontal imbalance with an unbalanced concentration of women and men in different fields. In technology, only 31 per cent of those who obtained a doctorate in 2022 were women, while the proportion of women was 66 per cent in medicine and health sciences, social sciences and humanities.

Diversity and the lack thereof can be found in various categories, such as sex, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disabilities. Statistics show that immigrants and descendants of immigrants made up 32 per cent of researchers and academic staff in Norwegian research and higher education in 2021 (SSB, 2023). However, 80 per cent of this group are internationally mobile researchers with a higher education from abroad (SSB, 2023). Thus, compared to the general population, very few research staff are descendants of immigrants or Norwegian-born with immigrant parents.

The framework for gender equality and diversity work in research organisations



What are the current frameworks and conditions for the gender equality and diversity work in research organisations in Norway?

Efforts to improve the gender balance and strengthen diversity in the sector take place within certain political, legal, institutional and organisational frameworks that guide the work through both 'hard' measures – those that the institution must have in place – and 'soft' measures, which they can choose to have or facilitate.

Legal guidelines are issued to help the higher education and research sector comply with the requirement to make active, targeted and systematic efforts to promote equality and prevent discrimination (Equality and Anti-discrimination Act, 2018, section 26). Reference is also made to the duty to promote gender equality and report on activities in the University and University Colleges Act (2005, section 6-2).

The EU and its gender equality policies influence Norway's gender equality policy, and thus also the efforts aimed at gender balance and diversity in academia.¹ For instance, despite the wide variety of quotas applied in different countries, EU directives and rulings from the Court of Justice of the European Union provide a clear framework delineating acceptable and unacceptable parameters for measures in line with EU law (Holst, Skjeie and Teigen, 2019). Since 2021, recipients of research funding from Horizon

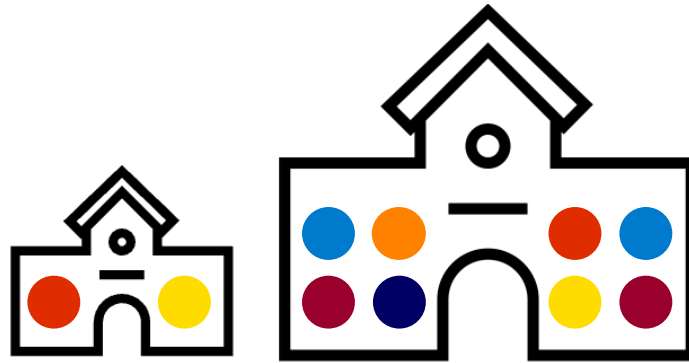
Europe have been required to have a gender equality plan (GEP) in place.²

Guidelines are also provided for the preparatory work in the governance dialogue between the Ministry of Education and Research and the institutions.

Financial instruments also guide the work, and make gender perspectives on both research content and the gender composition of research groups a criterion for the allocation of research funding from various programmes by the Research Council of Norway and Horizon Europe. Other financial instruments involve the allocation of earmarked resources or the establishment of specific programmes, such as the Research Council's BALANSE programme, or the appointment of special committees, such as the Committee for Gender Balance and Diversity in Research (KIF Committee).

Furthermore, Norway has helped pioneer the development of organisational structures and instruments for efforts in gender balance and diversity at institutional level in state higher education institutions. This includes appointing committees and gender equality ombuds, or creating dedicated advisory positions in this area.

What does the work for gender equality and diversity entail and is it effective?



Large research and educational institutions have more resources to dedicate to efforts in gender balance and diversity.

AFI's study (Egeland and Drange, 2022) shows that the size of the institutions, their social mission, profile and structural conditions all influence the perception of the scope for gender balance and diversity in different organisations.

The magnitude of available resources for such efforts varies (Tica, 2021). Large universities' operational framework conditions differ from those in the institute sector. If, for example, institutions have large internal research communities that put gender balance and diversity on their academic agenda and can leverage financial instruments such as those in the BALANSE programme, this will also have an impact on the measures they choose to try out.

Thus, while the measures being tested at the various institutions may differ, all institutions are subject to the same legal guidelines for strengthening the efforts in gender balance and diversity and are therefore required to make active, targeted and systematic efforts to promote equality and prevent discrimination.

Systematic efforts as regards the duty to promote gender equality and report on activities are commonplace among institutions. They have also implemented organisational measures in relation to gender balance and diversity (see page 5), and recent research suggests that these have been effective.

Drange et al. (2023) examined the measures employed by universities in the Nordic region to improve the gender balance in the workforce, as well as which measures have proved to be effective in increasing the proportion of female professors. Various measures were found to be employed, but two types stand out as particularly important:

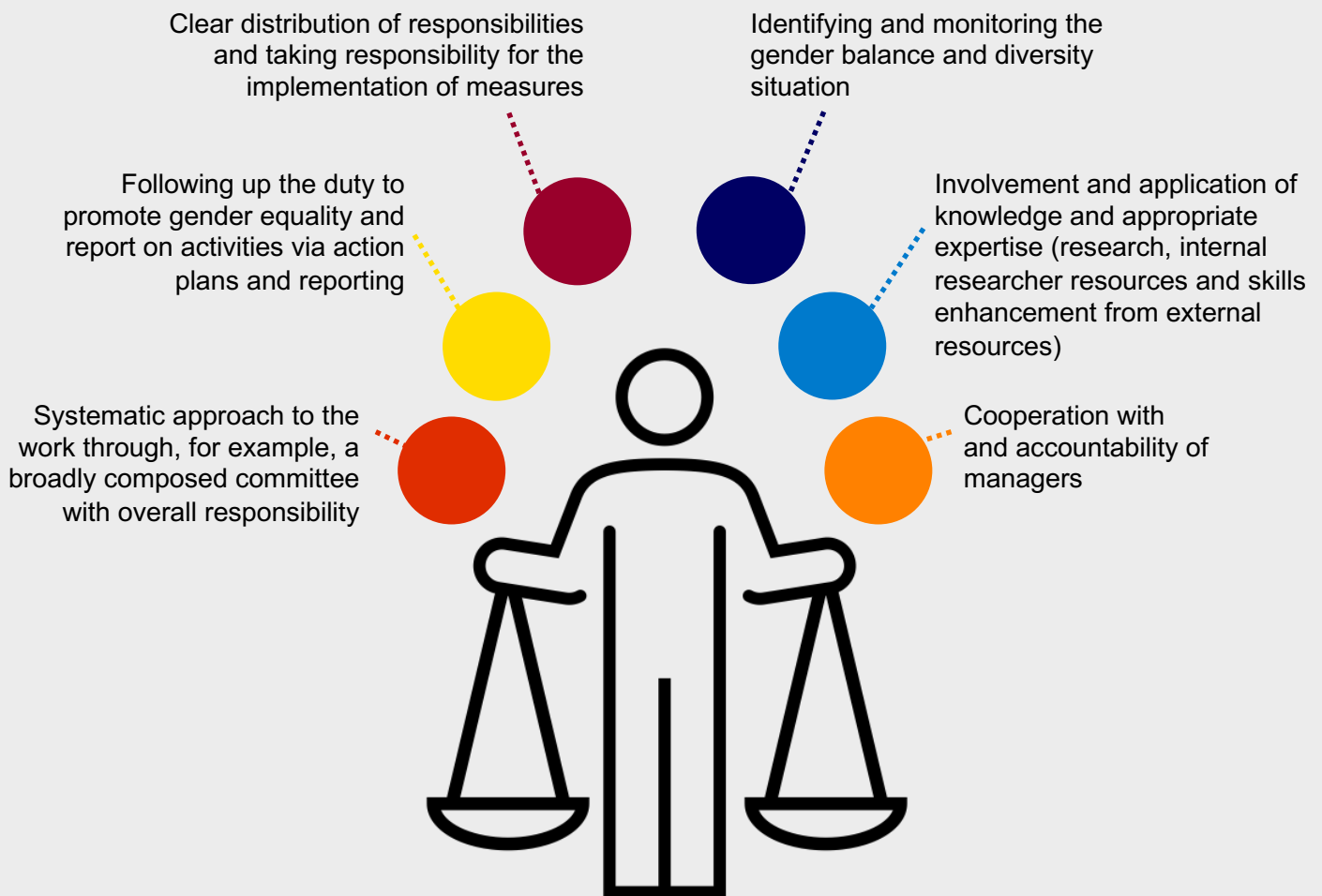
- **Earmarking funding or positions for the underrepresented sex.** This has an almost immediate effect on the gender distribution in a job category.
- **Having an equality and diversity adviser.** Of all the measures examined by Drange et al. (2023), having an equality or diversity adviser had the greatest effect on increasing the proportion of female professors.

This is consistent with earlier research indicating that an equality and diversity adviser plays a crucial role in advancing gender equality within an organisation (Dobbin and Kalev, 2015) and that having such a role may, in itself, enhance the effectiveness of other measures (Drange et al., 2023) as a result of:

- establishing a clear organisational structure for the distribution of responsibilities
- identifying and earmarking resources for assessing the situation, generating knowledge about and implementing measures.

Why is having an equality and diversity adviser effective?

AFI's study (Egeland and Drange, 2022) shows that the crucial importance of the role is linked to the following organisational measures:



Scope for learning – challenges and recommendations

AFI's study (Egeland and Drange, 2022) demonstrates that the institutions employ various organisational measures in their gender balance and diversity efforts, and that equality and diversity advisers play a key role in creating systematic approaches to the work and thus scope for learning.

The equality and diversity advisers ensure continuity in their efforts based on a clear distribution of responsibilities and systematic working, such as the duty to promote gender equality and report on activities, as well as gender equality and diversity plans. This makes the work less susceptible to challenges than if it depended solely on committed managers and enthusiasts. This systematic approach and continuity create scope for organisational learning as opposed to employees having to attend external courses to learn about equality and diversity.

AFI's study further shows that the efforts in gender balance and diversity are also influenced by an institution's focus on vertical and horizontal gender imbalances, sexual harassment (as a result of academia also coming under the #MeToo spotlight) and problems arising from internationalisation (such as language barriers). Challenges faced by employees or students with disabilities or by Norwegian-born researchers with immigrant parents are not currently high on the agenda. This is despite statistics showing that descendants of immigrants are underrepresented among research personnel compared to the general population. The same applies to those termed 'first-generation students'. Although the discussion on social class and academic careers surfaces from time to time,³ there is a notable absence of evidence-based measures in this area.

Globalisation has direct implications for the efforts in gender equality and diversity in the sector: studies indicate an increase of three percentage points in the proportion of female

professors in Norway as a result of international recruitment (Wendt, Gunnes and Aksnes, 2022). However, internationalisation and growing demand for mobility can also lead to continued, and in some cases reinforced, gender inequality and vulnerability (see for example Jöns, 2011; Vabø et al., 2014; Pietilä et al., 2021). A research career often entails a series of temporary positions marked by lack of security. Increasing demands and expectations for researcher mobility can force young researchers, both male and female, to rule out a research career (Schaer, 2022; Brami et al., 2022; Egeland et al., in progress).

Resources should therefore be allocated for a further, systematic analysis and data collection to shed light on these challenges and provide a basis for the development of expanded or new organisational measures.

To ensure the ongoing continuity and impact of efforts in gender equality and diversity, we recommend involving equality and diversity advisers in both strategy and policy work related to internationalisation, mobility and researcher recruitment. This is not only crucial for preventing gender equality and diversity efforts from being sidelined or overshadowed by discussions about the challenges faced by today's research organisations; the main reason is to ensure that those aspiring to a career in research are given the opportunity to help address the significant and fundamental challenges we all face – regardless of sex, ability or background.

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Footnotes

¹ See for example: EU gender equality strategy (Union of Equality) (COM/2020/152 final), the Communication from the Commission “A new ERA for Research and Innovation” (COM/2020/628 final); The Council Conclusions on the New European Research Area (13567/20) in December 2020 Council Conclusions on the future governance of the European Research Area (14308/21) – ERA Policy Agenda Action 5: Promote gender equality and foster inclusiveness, taking note of the Ljubljana declaration; Position paper on the future gender equality priority in the ERA 2020-2030 (ERAC 1204/20) – by ERAC SWG GRI.

² KI0221647ENN.en.pdf - doi:10.2777/97891

³ See for example the article on major class differences, also internally at university colleges (khrono.no)



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