

Gender equality and gender perspectives in research

Policy
2007 – 2012



About the Research Council of Norway

The Research Council of Norway is a national strategic and funding agency for research activities. The Council serves as a chief source of advice on and input into research policy for the Norwegian Government, the central government administration and the overall research community. Moreover, the Research Council works together with research institutions as well as the private and public sectors to enhance financial and quality targets in Norwegian research

and innovation activities. It is the task of the Research Council to identify Norway's research needs and recommend national priorities. The Council utilises specifically-targeted funding schemes to help translate national research policy goals into action. The Research Council provides a central meeting place for those who fund, carry out and utilise research and works actively to promote the internationalisation of Norwegian research.

Policy for gender equality and gender perspectives in research

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Challenges

In 2007, 83% of all full professors in Norway were men. At the same time, over half of the students at the highest levels of study were women, and research fellowship positions have been fairly evenly distributed between women and men in the past decade. Except for within a few disciplines, both genders have been well represented in the recruitment pool. Nonetheless, there continues to be a systematic under-recruitment, also known as “shedding”, of women to research as a career and to advancement to higher positions. Increasingly critical attention has been focused on gender-biased selection processes in academia.

Gender-biased recruitment poses a democratic challenge because access to – and the design of – research in most fields is unevenly distributed between women and men. In addition, today’s biased recruitment patterns constitute substantial waste of intellectual resources and loss of researcher talent. This situation presents a crucial challenge for the research system, not least in light of the generation shift currently taking place.

Norway is not alone in this regard. Gender-biased selection processes in academia are a common feature of European research, and have been thoroughly documented and discussed in various reports by the European Commission¹. This phenomenon has been described as a “leaky pipeline”: women systematically “leak” from the “pipeline” of recruitment to academia.

Gender-biased recruitment and male dominance in research and research management are also increasingly being viewed as a *problem affecting the quality of research* as such. Internationally there is growing recognition of the need for greater *gender sensitisation* in all activities involving the development of new knowledge. Gender sensitisation implies that the significance of gender is acknowledged and integrated into research policy priorities and initiatives, programme activities, recruitment measures, etc.

The report *Kvinner i forskning – fra kvotering til integrering* (“Women in research – from quotas to integration”) published by the Research Council in 2003 concludes by stating that the challenge in coming years lies in shifting the focus from schemes specially targeted toward the recruitment of women to actual integration of gender and gender-equality concerns into ordinary activities. In this context, the Research Council must clarify the boundaries between instruments designed to advance *gender equality in research* on the one hand and those designed to promote *gender perspectives in research* on the other. While the issue of gender equality mainly involves the need for more gender-balanced *recruitment* to and within research, both to top-level positions and to specific research fields, the promotion of gender perspectives in research entails efforts to highlight the *relevance and significance* of gender within the individual subject area. At a macro-level, however, these challenges must be viewed as interrelated.

¹ See, e.g., the ETAN report *Science policies in the European Union: Promoting excellence through mainstreaming gender equality* (1999), *Waste of talents: Turning private struggles into a public issue* (2004) focusing on the situation in the “ENWISE” countries (Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic) and *Gender and Excellence in the Making* (2004) which discusses the relationship between the dynamics of gender selection and the quality of research.

Report No. 20 (2004-2005) to the Storting, *Commitment to Research*, gives the Research Council a clear integration task and advocates efforts to integrate gender-equality concerns at all levels of research administration, application processing and reporting. At the same time, the overall priority being given to mathematics, science and technology (MST) disciplines involves a number of gender-related issues and challenges that are not discussed in the government report. The focus on MST subjects is also a focus on traditionally male-dominated fields. Without adequate integration of a gender dimension into instruments related to prioritisation procedures in these subject areas, these efforts may inadvertently serve to strengthen undesired selection and resource allocation based on gender. Research in the MST subjects also produces new, sometimes pioneering, knowledge and technologies with far-reaching social impact. Gender must be incorporated as a central element in the analysis and assessment of such impacts.

The Research Council has a social responsibility to enhance the quality of Norwegian research. The Research Council must systematically and consciously work to ensure that instruments are designed to support and reinforce selection processes that promote greater gender balance in academia and strengthen the gender perspective in research. The challenge for the Research Council is to develop effective mechanisms that serve to fulfil overall research-policy objectives while simultaneously promoting sensitivity to the integration of gender and gender-equality perspectives into its own priorities.

Gender equality in research

Objective

The Research Council will seek a central role in the advancement of gender equality in Norwegian research.

Reasoning

The Ministry of Education and Research, the Research Council of Norway and the individual research institutions have different roles to play in the effort to increase gender equality in research. The Research Council bears a national research-policy responsibility by virtue of its role as an advisory and allocating agency. The Research Council must strengthen its role in this area, become more concrete and explicit in its approach, and give more active support to the institutions' own objectives and measures. However, the institutions themselves have not all come uniformly far in their gender-equality efforts. A more focused effort on the part of the Research Council will therefore also foster learning and knowledge transfer regarding best practice vis-à-vis institutions that lag behind.

In the EU's Sixth Framework Programme (FP6), *gender* was one of three general elements to be weighed in the assessment of grant applications. Under this framework programme, proposals within Networks of Excellent and Integrated Projects were required to include gender action plans, and all applications had to explain how the projects incorporated a gender dimension. In the Seventh Framework Programme this is no longer a standard requirement for all applications, but all projects awarded funding are required to have a gender action plan. The difference between Norway and the EU is that, thus far, Norway has only introduced a requirement for an action plan in connection with one of its funding instruments, *the Norwegian Centres of Excellence*

(CoE) scheme, whereas the EU has introduced this requirement on a broader basis. In short, the EU is ahead of Norway in this area.

The Research Council integrated an explicit gender-equality component into the funding announcement for new CoEs in 2005. This was the first attempt in recent years to draw attention to gender equality considerations by integrating them into an important initiative. The gender-equality dimension was also integrated into the funding announcement for *the Centres for Research-based Innovation (SFI) scheme*, which is targeted at groups that often have a very asymmetrical gender composition.

The first funding announcement for *the Outstanding Young Investigators scheme (OYI)* did not take into account the fact that women and men have different career cycles with regard to age. The phase when a researcher is considered to be “young” may be somewhat different for women and men due to differences in their life cycles. Moreover, there are differences in the age when a person achieves prominence as a researcher that stem from the nature of the individual subject field. In 2006, the funding announcement was adapted somewhat on the basis of the insight gained from the first time around. The adaptation of the funding announcement resulted in a much larger pool of female applicants for the most recent call for proposals, and far better balanced gender distribution in the group awarded funding.

A review of the impact of these instruments will generate new knowledge for use in designing future measures, as well as for other instruments in the Research Council’s portfolio.

The desire to achieve greater gender balance in grant allocations for new CoEs, OYIs and SFIs also raises fundamental questions of principle importance about the relationship between gender and the quality of research.

In general, and especially in the context of large-scale, excellence-promoting initiatives, the Research Council needs a broader discussion about and closer specification of the criteria that will serve as the basis for grant allocations. Up to now concepts and criteria related to scientific merit have not been linked to gender. Gender has been defined as irrelevant in principle and seen as *a supplement to* the quality assessments that are made. Nor is it unusual for gender and excellence to be viewed as contradictory; an over-emphasis on gender equality is often perceived as potentially detrimental to quality considerations. The focus on gender equality concerns in the introductory assessment process for the new CoEs illustrates the dilemma that may arise when new, ambitious policy concerns are to be integrated, but are defined as extraneous to the primary consideration – in this case, quality.

The Research Council will:

- Strengthen the dialogue with institutions and research communities on gender equality with regard to recruitment, research management, etc.;
- Develop and specify measures that support the institutions’ own objectives and aspirations;
- Introduce a requirement that initiatives and programmes draw up their own gender-equality plans;
- Integrate the gender dimension in measures related to the MST strategy;

- Identify strengths and weaknesses in relation to the implementation of gender equality considerations in schemes such as CoE, SFI and OYI. Experience thus far is to be summarised and publicised both internally and externally, and is to serve as the basis for revising, and possibly improving, the initiatives, as well as for potential transfer to other initiatives.
- Implement a broader review/study of criteria for and conceptions about the relationship between gender and quality in research;
- Ensure that the principle of a 40/60 percent gender distribution for boards, committees and commissions applies to *all* advisory bodies, committees, etc.

Gender perspectives in research

Objective

The Research Council will promote the integration of gender perspectives in research upon the establishment of new programmes and initiatives and in ongoing activities.

Reasoning

We live in a gendered world. Gender is a key organising principle of society, and biological and social differences do exist. Sound research must take this into account.

A review of major projects under the Fifth Framework Programme conducted by the Women and Science Unit under the European Commission shows distinct, research-related weaknesses, e.g. in medical research, because the gender dimension was not given due consideration in the research design.

In a Norwegian context, too, there may be research fields in which the gender dimension is of relevance and significance, but where it is not adequately reflected in or integrated into the Research Council's programme-related activities. As a first step in learning more about this, it would be beneficial to compile an overview of the explicitly gender-related research and incorporation of gender perspectives in the ongoing programmes and projects funded under the Research Council.

The Research Council should bring its own policy in line with current practice within the EU by requiring that grant applications reflect on potential gender dimensions of their research project. Gender perspectives should also be incorporated into programmes and initiatives upon their establishment, and should be included systematically in the programme evaluations.

It has previously been proposed that the Research Council set aside resources in a special incentive budget to encourage greater focus on gender perspectives, thereby facilitating the study of gender perspectives in programme-based research where this was not originally incorporated as an integral component. This proposal should be given more consideration as it would promote the integration of gender perspectives in the scientific design of a programme. The main challenge will be to create a framework for and encourage greater integration of gender perspectives in the Research Council's programmes and initiatives.

The Research Council will

- Compile an overview of gender-related research and gender perspectives in ongoing programmes, initiatives and other instruments;
- Introduce a requirement that new programmes and initiatives reflect the gender dimension when they are established. The gender dimension must also be incorporated into the evaluations;
- Consider establishing a separate incentive budget for gender perspectives for currently active programmes and initiatives.

Internal organisation

Objective

The Research Council will administer all efforts related to gender equality and gender perspectives in research as a shared, overall task for the organisation as a whole.

Reasoning

Gender and gender equality constitute comprehensive perspectives and tasks across all thematic areas dealt with by the Research Council. This principle must be incorporated into the organisational foundation as well as the manner in which the individual units address these issues. While the overall responsibility lies with the Research Council's top management, the research departments and other entities affected by the various development tasks and measures within the field must also share the responsibility when it comes to dealing with this in practice. Resource needs and organisation must be assessed as part of the same whole.

There is an initial need to strengthen the coordination function and raise the level of expertise on gender issues within the administration. As the coordination function has been specifically assigned to the Division for Science, a structure of relevant networks across divisions and departments will be necessary. The work methods for this should be reviewed and renewed.

A clearer focus on the coordination function and greater emphasis on integration could also mean that the research boards of the other divisions should become involved in decision-making processes as well.

The Research Council will

- Conduct an evaluation of the internal organisation and resource needs in connection with efforts related to gender equality and gender perspectives in research;
- Establish operative, cross-cutting project groups to carry out specific tasks in connection with developing measures and strengthening the Research Council's efforts in the area of gender equality and gender perspectives in research;
- Simultaneously implement measures enhance competence within the administration, expert committees and programme boards.

A modern gender-equality profile

Objective

The Research Council will strengthen its gender-equality profile.


Reasoning

In addition to active efforts to strengthen the integration of gender-equality and gender perspectives in the Research Council's overall activities, it is crucial that the Research Council distinguishes itself as a modern organisation in the field of gender equality. The significance of a "banner" to hold up, be proud of, and associate with a common identity should not be underestimated. The universities have their mentor programmes which serve to create a positive identity and gender-equality symbols. The Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise (NHO) has its high-profile project known as "Female future". The positive value of these projects creates a sense of ownership and pride.

The Research Council must strengthen its own efforts in the field in general and assume a normative role in relation to those outside the organisation. In this context, ideas for a "banner project" should be developed. An effort should be made to strengthen the institution's gender profile both internally and externally, as well as in electronic media and in other contexts. An annual production of statistics which focuses more attention on the gender distribution in all subject areas would signal that the Research Council gives priority to these issues.

The Research Council will

- Cooperate with the Resource Centre for Gender Research in Norway (KILDEN) on efforts to strengthen the Research Council's dissemination profile in the context of gender and gender equality;
- Strengthen the gender profile of the annual production of statistics and make these available externally via the website;
- Develop ideas for implementing a "banner project" for the Research Council.



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