Advancing Gender Equality in the European Research Area

I) Introduction: The global talent competition: a level playing field?

Ensuring gender equality is not only a matter of fairness; it is also an issue of economic efficiency and research quality. There is a growing set of evidence showing that mixed research teams and mixed boards perform better. In the economic sector, the benefits gained from gender balance in teams and boards are evidenced in financial performance and profit, overall governance, employees’ engagement, customers’ satisfaction and number of publications in scientific journals.¹

The increased competition for talent being global, Europe must use the full potential of its well educated labour force. However, statistics clearly show that talent is not always considered in an equal manner: there is a clear underrepresentation of women in leadership positions and involvement in decision-making. This statement is particularly true for the research and innovation sector. Women represent 47% of PhD graduates or equivalent, 33% of researchers, 20% of top level academics, and just one in every ten universities in the European Union has a female rector.² This situation is commonly described with the image of a sticky floor or a glass ceiling and points to the difficulty that women face if they intend to advance their careers in the same way as men. However, everyone with the same talent should be able to compete at equal level and without gender determining the chances of success.

Gender equality in research and innovation has gained increased attention in the European Union (EU). The EU has a well-established regulatory framework on gender equality, including binding Directives³, which apply across the whole labour market, and thus also to the research sector. All Member States have to various degrees brought their national laws in conformity with the EU Directives, but ensuring full application and enforcement of the rights foreseen by such laws remains a challenge.

However, the peculiarities of the research sector demand a tailored response to guarantee de facto gender equality in research combining scientific career development with adequate social protection for all. Moreover, issues such as gender bias in evaluating scientific performance or appointment to leadership and decision-making positions fall outside the EU

¹ “Gender Diversity and Performance” in European Commission (2006): Women in Science and Technology - the Business Perspective. The direct impact of a better gender balance in teams and boards on researchers’ careers are less evidenced, given that appropriate qualitative monitoring mechanisms are missing and evidence on researchers’ career pathways is still very limited.
² Most recent available data from SHE Figures 2012 for top level academics and rectors (2010), and from the She Figures 2015 leaflet for PhD graduates (2012) and researchers (2011).
Directives because of the absence of an actual employment relationship. Although direct support to female scientists’ careers has been complemented by efforts to better integrate gender equality into research organisations’ strategies and plans, statistics show that these measures have not yet achieved the desired impacts.

II) Gender equality policy in the European Research Area

The importance of gender equality in research and innovation was first highlighted in 1999, when the Commission adopted a specific Communication on: "Women and Science: Mobilising Women to enrich European Research". Further on, in 2005, gender equality was also included in the European Charter for Researchers and in the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers, which is implemented through the EU Human Resources Strategy for Researchers.

The Competitiveness Council of 18th April 2005 adopted Council Conclusions on reinforcing Human Resources in Science and Technology in the European Research Area (ERA) and reaffirmed that “scientific excellence can be improved by promoting gender awareness and fairness; evaluation and selection procedures need to be transparent and free of gender bias”. Furthermore Member States were invited “to formulate ambitious targets for the participation of women focussing on areas where women are seriously under-represented, and in particular increase significantly the number of women in leading positions, with the aim of reaching, as a first step, the goal of 25% in the public sector as an average in the EU, as well as boost their participation in industrial research and technology.” The Competitiveness Council of 30th May 2008 adopted Council Conclusions on Family-Friendly Scientific Careers and invited the Commission and Member States to develop an integrated model of scientific careers based on an appropriate policy mix ensuring family-friendly environment for researchers.

In July 2012 the European Commission presented the Communication called “A Reinforced European Research Area Partnership for Excellence and Growth” where Member States are invited to create a legal and policy environment and provide incentives to:
- remove legal and other barriers to the recruitment, retention and career progression of female researchers while fully complying with EU law on gender equality;
- address gender imbalances in decision making processes;
- strengthen the gender dimension in research programmes;

Furthermore Member States were invited to engage in partnerships with funding agencies, research organisations and universities to foster cultural and institutional change on gender and to ensure that at least 40% of the under-represented sex participates in committees involved in recruitment/career progression and in establishing and evaluating research programmes.

The ERA Roadmap adopted by the European Research Area Committee (ERAC) in April 2015 and endorsed by the Competitiveness Council of 29th of May 2015 identifies under its Priority

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4 COM(1999)76
7 Doc(10212/08)
3 – An open labour market for researchers – as top action the need to use “Open, transparent and merit based recruitment practices with regard to research positions” in order to encourage mobility and gender equality and to contribute to the realisation of the ERA. Under Priority 4 - Gender equality and gender mainstreaming in research – the top-action priority is to translate “national equality legislation into effective action to address gender imbalances in research institutions and decision making bodies and integrating the gender dimension better into R&D policies, programmes and projects”. The rationale of these actions is the positive correlation between the existence of national laws, strategies and incentives specifically aimed at fostering institutional change and concrete action by research performing organisations.

The Regulation establishing Horizon 2020 addresses gender equality at different levels ranging from gender balance in evaluation panels to integrating the gender dimension in research and innovation contents in strategies, programmes and projects.¹⁸

In order to achieve better progress, taking into account the vast pool of decisions and recommendations already adopted at national and European level, it is important to further develop and implement these strong commitments.

### III) Stepping up gender equality in the ERA

In order to attract the best researchers to Europe, a fair, transparent and gender-balanced participation in research is needed. It goes without saying that the same high standards of excellence have to be applied to the hiring and promotion of both men and women. An open labour market approach combined with the consideration of individual achievements, career pathways and mobility patterns should guide the recruitment processes. In order to considerably improve gender equality in research there is a need for focussed, result-oriented actions at political, funding and institutional level.

#### III-1 Fostering institutional change

There has been a gradual move in the gender debate from ‘fixing the women’ to ‘fixing the institutions’⁹. Achieving gender equality in research calls for full-fledged gender equality plans, which combine the tracking of gender bias in the organisation, appropriate actions to remove them and a proper monitoring of the progress made. This covers in particular recruitment and career progression processes. While merit is the basic principle of recruitment, there are practices which hinder female scientists' career and advancement systems especially within temporary or part-time appointments, credit-giving activities, evaluations of scientific performance and appointments to leadership and decision-making positions.

The ERA Progress Report 2014 shows that there are relatively more research performing organisations setting up gender equality plans in countries where there is a strong political

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commitment with national laws, strategies and/or financial incentives for gender equality in public research. In particular, one or more of the following action lines are observed:

- Laws that include specific provisions on gender in research;
- Memoranda of understanding signed between the ministries and the universities/research organisations;
- Specific funding for gender equality programmes and/or the inclusion of gender equality requirements in research funding programmes;
- Including gender equality clauses among the criteria used by national authorities to evaluate universities/research organisations, before deciding on their funding;
- Including gender equality clauses among the conditions used by national funding agencies to attribute research funding.

Appropriate gender awareness training for peer review, selection committees and decision-making bodies play an important role in the overall process of advancing and reaching sustainable results.

The move towards gender equality in research could be supported by conceiving new scientific quality/excellence approaches. Normalising research outputs, outcomes and impacts to the researchers’ time actually spent in research could prevent penalising phases of lower scientific productivity. For instance, maternal and parental leaves or leaves in connection with elder care or dual career arrangements reduce the productive period of researchers and, when assessing their productivity, they may lead to a bias which needs to be removed by appropriate clauses.

**III-2 Ensuring gender balance in leadership and decision-making positions**

Advancing gender equality in recruitment and career progression is also related to the participation of women in governance structures and the decision-making bodies. Setting targets helps address efficiently gender unbalances in leadership and decision-making positions. The number of countries which have set targets for gender parity in research decision-making increased from eight in 2008 to 18 in 2013. Although it was long argued that there were not enough female scientists/women to fill in the posts, this argument is losing ground considering the growing pool of skilled female scientists. However, information about qualified female scientists, covering all research areas and disciplines, is still not widely available at European level. European wide structures, networks and databases could complement the existing national and/or institutional directories in the quest to assure visibility of qualified and available female scientists when hiring for leadership and decision-making positions.

**III-3 Endowing gender equality strategies with adequate financial means**

Mobilising adequate resources is essential to ensure the implementation of policies and strategies relating to gender equality. Some countries have specific programmes to provide government funding based on the institutions work and commitment on gender equality.

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10 ERA Facts and Figures 2014
11 EURAXESS Researchers Report 2013
Some Member States made substantial progress by including requirements on gender equality in major sources of research funding and/or of the funding of universities. Similarly, national research agencies have set various kinds of gender requirements before offering funding to the applicant institutions. Promoting gender equality is part of the conditions to channel European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), in particular research initiatives funded by ESIF.

IV) Questions for discussion

1. What would you consider being the most important elements of a gender equality policy within the context of national ERA action plans or strategies?

2. In order to improve gender equality in leadership and decision-making positions, would you consider setting targets being an appropriate way forward or would you favour other mechanisms?

3. Would you follow the example of countries that have a dedicated national funding programme or financial incentives on gender equality? Would you support targeted programs linking gender equality to open recruitment and institutional and cultural change?