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HOW CAN HIGHER EDUCATION PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND NON-DISCRIMINATION?

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Abstract

Over the last decade, the EU has made slow progress towards gender equality. European Institute for Gender Equality EIGE's 2021 Index shows that it will take nearly three generations to achieve gender equality at the current pace. COVID-19 could slow down progress even further.

Gender equality varies considerably by member state. For example, the Finnish labour market is among the most gender segregated in the EU. Women favour professions in education and care, whereas men prefer technology and logistics. Within different fields, the segregation continues and shows as differences in jobs, wages and career paths.

Higher education (HE) institutes play an important role in promoting gender equality and non-harassment because they educate the professionals and managers of the future. That is why every HE organisation should have a detailed, efficient and well-structured gender equality and non-harassment plan. However, only about ten per cent of HE staff members in Finland know that an educational institution must have an equality plan.

Moreover, the EU's Gender Equality Strategy sets out an ambitious framework for the next five years, which is formally endorsed by the European Commission, on how to advance gender equality in Europe and beyond. Horizon Europe calls for proposals from public bodies, research organisations and HE institutions from EU member states and associated countries. To promote gender equality, these applying organisations must have a GEP or equivalent strategy in place to be eligible for funding.

In this paper, we will describe how to ideate, plan and integrate a plan into a HE's everyday educational work in cooperation with the management, staff members and students.

Keywords: Gender equality, non-discrimination, diversity, higher education (HE).

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the EU has made slow progress towards gender equality. EIGE's 2021 Index shows it will take nearly three generations to achieve gender equality at the current pace. COVID-19 could slow down progress even further [1].

To better understand the meaning of gender equality, we need to understand what gender is and how to define a gender equality plan (GEP). Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women, men, girls and boys. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time [2].

Gender refers to both an attribute or entity associated with a person and a power relationship. Gender can also be related to a socially assimilating role. The most common way to perceive gender is to do so through confrontation based on biological and physical differences [3].

In addition, gender refers to the socially and culturally constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities and how people perceive themselves and interact with each other. Gender equality can be defined as positive actions and policies of making things happen – setting objectives and positive measures to promote gender equality and preventing gender-based discrimination [4].

What is a gender equality plan? "A GEP is a set of actions that aim to promote gender equality through institutional and cultural change in research and innovation (R&I) organisations" [5].

Since 1957, the EU has been the central key to support gender equality. Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome, which was signed in Rome, establishes the principle of equal pay and equal work. A lot of positive things have happened since the signing of the Treaty of Rome. Perhaps the most impressive of them is the Strategy Engagement for Gender Equality 2016–2019, published by the European Commission. It

creates a framework promoting gender equality in Europe and focuses on five areas: (1) increasing female labour market participation and equal economic independence; (2) reducing the gender pay, earnings and pension gaps, thus fighting poverty among women; (3) promoting equality between women and men in decision-making; (4) combating gender-based violence and protecting and supporting victims; and, finally, (5) promoting gender equality and women's rights across the world [6].

In Finland, the Act on Equality between Women and Men (609/1986) [7] was only enacted in 1986. It mandates the monitoring and promotion of the equality of personnel and education in educational institutions. The law looks at equality very much from the point of view of work. The Equality Act prohibits gender-based discrimination, such as discrimination related to pregnancy, giving birth, parenthood, obligation to care for one's family, gender identity and gender expression.

The purpose of the Non-Discrimination Act (1325/2004) [8] is to prevent discrimination and draft clear instructions for ensuring the legal protection of potential targets of discrimination. Educational institutions and HE institutions must draft an equality and non-discrimination plan together with the personnel, students and occupational health and safety officers. A HE institute must ensure that all genders have the same opportunities in education and career advancement and that teaching, research and teaching materials support the realisation of gender equality. This means, among other things, that student selection must be based on individual, and not gender-related, factors. Education must also aim to dismantle ways of thinking, practices and norms that lead to stereotypical choices. Teaching materials must be developed so that they do not reinforce formulaic prejudices and gender ideas [7], [8].

According to Finnish legislation, HEs must have gender equality and non-discrimination plans. The HE can decide whether it wants to create only one plan that includes perspectives on both equality and non-discrimination or whether to make separate plans. The Ministry of Education and Culture examined the quality and validity of gender and equality plans for universities and universities of applied sciences in 2020. According to the report, the plans leave a lot of room for improvement. When examined in relation to the provisions of the Act on Equality between Women and Men, most of the plans required updating. Some of the plans were not currently in force, and some of them were missing certain sections required by the Act, such as an assessment of the implementation of previous development measures [9].

We discovered our plans were in dire need of updating and supplementation. What makes a good gender equality plan? The plan should include topics about equal recruitment, career development, pay, reconciliation of work and family life and prevention of discrimination and harassment. In addition, the plan should include measures promoting equality and internationalisation of staff. These are most often related to recruitment or workplace development through different forms of equality training. The university should assess the implementation of previous measures.

With Horizon Europe, the Commission reaffirms its commitment to gender equality in research and innovation. To avoid being cut off from European Research Council (ERC) funding and other financial support, universities must create and implement a GEP [10]. To meet the eligibility criteria, a GEP must fulfil four mandatory process-related requirements: (1) the publication of a formal document on the institution's website that is signed by upper management; (2) a commitment of resources and expertise in gender equality to implement the plan; (3) data collection and monitoring of sex/gender disaggregated personnel (and students, for the establishments concerned) and annual reporting based on indicators; and (4) awareness raising/training on gender equality and unconscious gender biases for staff and decision makers [11].

In practice, the measures and objectives must cover a number of areas typically included in GEPs: (a) life/work and organisational balance; (b) gender balance in leadership and decision-making processes; (c) gender equality in recruitment and career development; (d) gender integration in research and educational content; and (e) action to combat gender-based violence, including sexual harassment [10].

2 METHODOLOGY

We began updating our plan in Autumn 2020. We used a multi-method methodology to collect our data. Creswell [12] said that all methods have limitations, and researchers should consider that biases inherent in any single method could neutralise or cancel the biases of other methods. So it might be more useful to add more possibilities for data collection. Using a mixed method or multi-method approach, the researcher stands on more pragmatic ground, while collecting both numeric and text data so that the database consists of both qualitative and quantitative results.

We established a planning team consisting of the following participants: HR director, administrative director, two principal lecturers, quality manager and two members of the student union, Helga.

During the first stage, we collected data related to gender equality themes from different sources to understand the current situation at our university. Information on students' well-being, accessibility and study conditions has been collected using student, equality and non-discrimination surveys; the Toteemi project's student survey; the student union Helga's accessibility survey; SAMOK (Finland for Students); and Helga's remote studying survey, among others.

During the second stage, we interviewed staff, the institution's psychologist, psychiatric nurse, institution priest and key representatives of the student union, Helga. Additionally, the surveys and statistics of Haaga-Helia's Quality Portal were examined. We collected data from personnel surveys, equality indicators and ability to work surveys and used personnel's key indicators as its basis. The collected data was analysed and the most important improvement topics were named.

In addition, a co-creation workshop was held in March 2021 and was attended by Haaga-Helia personnel, teachers, administration and support services personnel, managers, representatives of occupational health and safety and representatives of the student body.

The aim of conducting a co-creation/collaboration workshop was to exchange ideas and insights about developing and reshaping the GEP. More specifically, the focus was on discussing the strengths and opportunities of the GEP, setting objectives and measures for the coming years and implementing the objectives in everyday work. The work started collecting weak signals that can have an effect and can help in development and implementation, as well as in recognising the strengths of the organisation to build a collective understanding of how to promote gender equality in the future and how to make the best of the organisation. Figure 1 below shows a timeline of the planning process.

After selecting the objectives and measures, we wrote the plan and created a communication and implementation plan. The communication and implementation plan included a list of the planned events, workshops, blog posts and articles and a schedule for their execution. In autumn 2021, we organised a kick-off event for the staff and students in Finnish and English. At the event, there was a presentation of the plan and speeches from representatives from the Office of the Ombudsman for Gender Equality and the Equality Commissioner. In autumn 2021 and spring 2022, we organised training and five workshops to promote gender equality in our university of applied sciences.



Figure 1. Timeline for the planning process

3 RESULTS

In order to plan the upcoming period's objectives, the planning team for the equality and non-discrimination plan met a total of eight times during a period of eight months, taking significantly longer than we anticipated. It is therefore necessary to allocate enough time for updating. The gender equality and non-discrimination

plan was constructed so that the requirements progress evenly in relation to both operations and personnel policy. Haaga-Helia's equality and non-discrimination plan is based on a jointly drafted strategy and values that create the foundation for equality and non-discrimination work within our organisation.

A comprehensive communication plan was included. Various activities, blog posts and the publication of articles at appropriate intervals was included in the communication plan. In addition, a kick-off event was held for all staff at the time the plan was announced.

In our opinion, it is very important to involve important stakeholders in planning. We were particularly happy with the contributions of students because they are more informed than many teachers about equality, concepts, terms and challenges in the field. We learned a lot from the students. They contributed new viewpoints on how to set the objectives and on how measures and perceptions of social norms have changed.

In addition, our planning team involved members of management, and our vice dean participated in our workshops. We promoted equality issues mainly through different projects, and we have a good relationship with the management, whose cooperation helped to push things forward. We have integrated monitoring of measures into existing working groups and forums, such as the statutory Occupational Safety and Health Committee, the Joint Action Committee and the Welfare Group. Gender and equality training has been included in orientation for new employees and students.

At least 200 staff members out of a total number of 600 participated in our workshops and training.

4 CONCLUSIONS

A lot of work has been done and many events have been organised. We could even argue that we have met the EU's GEP requirements. We have a publication signed by our dean, and we have offered training and information to the staff. Specific people have been made responsible for implementing the plan. We have collected data and monitored the process. Despite our tremendous efforts, we are not satisfied. Why? Writing the plan was the easiest task. However, the plan is not enough. The challenge is the implementation. First, training is useless if the mindset does not change. There are still many people who think that gender equality is not their business. Creating gender-sensitive HEs and universities demands challenging the prevailing wisdom, and it may be lonely work [6]. Second, we have noticed that the promotion of gender equality is still predominantly on women's agendas; we need more men in the working groups. Third, discrimination happens but it is often difficult to see. Many women have reported that they lack support in their academic careers [4]. Fourth, unconscious bias is one of the main challenges in HEs and universities [13]. Until now, the promotion work has been done mainly as projects; although it should be part of the everyday work of HE institutions. Finally, the work of promoting gender equality should extend to every position in higher education, from recruitment to hiring and career development, and from learning materials and curriculums to entrance exams.

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