

Resolution of the  
27th General Assembly  
of the German Rectors'  
Conference (HRK)  
on 19 November 2019  
in Hamburg

**Women in higher man-  
agement positions in  
academia**

**HRK German Rectors' Conference**

The Voice of the Universities

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## Summary

The current data on gender equality paints a painfully clear picture: women are still under-represented in academia, and this is especially the case for positions that define the public perception of academia. Despite previous equal opportunity measures, additional efforts are needed to significantly increase the proportion of women in management positions and thus their visibility and speed up the necessary organisational and cultural shift.

- Gender equality is a structural issue that concerns all genders and not an isolated women's issue to be solved by women for women.
- All equal opportunity measures, whether oriented towards structure or the individual, must be scrutinised to determine how far they consolidate traditional gender stereotypes and roles and thus perpetuate disadvantages to women.
- As women assume more responsibilities in committees due to the low basic quotas based on committee appointments generally geared towards gender equality, they should be selected for more influential positions on committees.
- Greater support from important stakeholders in government, business and academia itself is needed for appointing women to particularly visible and influential management positions in the research system.
- Women who have held higher management positions in academia could make up an important part of this support system.

## 1. Initial situation

In 2006, the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) approved the recommendation 'Frauen fördern' (Advancement of women)<sup>1</sup>. This resolution was preceded by intensive preliminary work involving a group of experts. On this basis, a critical review of instruments was undertaken at the time with the aim of stimulating a new discussion about equal opportunity in academia.

The issue of gender equality has increasingly gained credence in universities and academia over the last decade. Although several concepts for implementation have been developed, achievements in the area of gender opportunities policy are still unsatisfactory. The headline '59, white, male', under which the results of a study by CHE<sup>2</sup> on German university heads were recently reported, sheds light on an important issue. Despite the problem of under-representation of women in academia being tackled, the lack of women in higher management positions has changed very little. The proportion of female professors has risen in recent years thanks to targeted measures such as the German Research Foundation's (DFG)

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<sup>1</sup> Frauen fördern (Advancement of women). Recommendation by the 209th Plenary Assembly of the HRK on 14/11/2006

<sup>2</sup> CHECK, Universitätsleitung in Deutschland (University management in Germany), state universities, dated December 2019

research-oriented standards on gender equality, the 'Professorinnenprogramm' (Programme for Women Professors) of the Federal and State Governments and various phases of the Excellence Initiative or Strategy. However, this only applies to a very limited extent to top positions in academia, such as the management of deans' offices and universities, university and foundation councils, as well as management positions in major group projects and important science organisations.

It is the view of the presidents and rectors of HRK member universities that intensified efforts and heightened public awareness are needed to significantly and sustainably increase the proportion of female scientists in management positions and thus in particularly visible and influential roles. The equal treatment of women in these positions must also be ensured.

## 2. Facts and figures

Since the approval of the HRK recommendation in 2006, the proportion of women at all levels of the research system has risen, however, they are still under-represented in management positions. 13.6 % of professorships were held by women in 2006, compared to 23.4 % in 2017. This equals less than an increase of one percentage point per year. It is proving to be increasingly difficult to maintain the increase in proportion, let alone increase it further. It is also striking that the proportion of women in higher paid C4/W3 professorships was still below 20 % in 2016; it was 24 % for C3/W2 and C2 professorships and over 40 % for junior professorships. The proportion of female professors in fixed-term positions and working on a part-time basis is also far higher than that of male professors.<sup>3</sup>

The situation is even more dramatic regarding particularly visible and influential positions in the research system: Only very few women hold top positions at the ten science organisations represented in the Alliance of German Science and Research Organisations.

Women currently account for a quarter of university heads, and only 19 % of deans' offices are managed by women.<sup>4</sup> The proportion of women at the helm of faculty and departmental conferences is 10 %, and only 2 women act as chairs of the 36 university hospitals.

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<sup>3</sup> Figures from: GWK. Chancengleichheit in Wissenschaft und Forschung (Equal opportunity in science and research), 22. Fortschreibung des Datenmaterials 2016/2017 zu Frauen in Hochschulen und außer-universitären Forschungseinrichtungen (22nd update of the data material from 2016/2017 on women in universities and non-university research institutions), Bonn 2018, Table 4.1

<sup>4</sup> Genderreport der Hochschulen in NRW 2019 (Gender report on universities in NRW 2019)

The low rates of women in management positions in the research system are not only inconsistent with the requirement of gender equality in the Constitution, the General Act on Equal Treatment and the corresponding national laws but also the spirit of the funding programmes and gender equality standards in the research system. The under-representation of women jeopardises important social and higher education and research policy targets. It means that creative potential is being ignored and the stronger potential for innovation as well as the higher productivity of diverse working groups representing all genders are not being made use of.<sup>5</sup>

### **3. Necessary measures**

The current data on gender equality paints a painfully clear picture: women are still under-represented in academia, and this is especially the case for positions that define the public perception of academia. Despite previous equal opportunity measures, additional efforts are needed to significantly increase the proportion of women in management positions and thus their visibility and influence.

#### **3.1. Good governance: modifying structures**

Many universities have developed and analysed equal opportunity measures in recent years, not least due to reporting and documentation obligations that go together with funding programmes and equal opportunity standards. Measures have been customised to tackle the drop-out phases (i.e. careers phases after a higher level of qualification has been reached during which women often leave the research system) and more programmes for female professors have been introduced. These measures are predominantly geared towards the individual, e.g. mentoring programmes for female researchers in the early stage of their career or targeted grants and prizes for women.

Such measures are not geared towards changing existing recruitment processes as well as organisational structures and cultures. It is necessary to continue offering individual funding measures. However, they must be combined with long-lasting structural modifications and a change in culture. Gender equality is not the responsibility of the individual, and even less so a challenge to be solved by women for women. Quite the contrary, intensified efforts are needed to make the entire research system take responsibility.

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<sup>5</sup> The HRK declared the following in its recommendation back in 2006: "The inadequate representation of women implies an efficiency and excellence deficit in higher education. The innovation potential of science and research can only be fully exploited if as many individuals of outstanding talent as possible, regardless of their gender, remain in the research sector and do not transfer to other employment sectors before they reach their full potential."

University heads play a central role in this: it is their responsibility to ensure that gender equality is treated as a cross-cutting issue and an essential part of the university profile. A good example of a systematic and extensive equal opportunity measure is the Programme for Women Professors (Professorinnenprogramm) of the Federal and State Governments, which affects universities as a whole, as structures have to be disclosed and modified in the stipulated gender equality strategy, as well as its documentation and further development. The example also demonstrates that it is beneficial to create financial incentive and reward structures that affect universities at all levels.<sup>6</sup>

### **3.2. Overcoming stereotypes**

Among the modifications of organisational structures and cultures, i.e. generally geared towards equal opportunity, the measure of introducing working and committee hours that are compatible with family life as well as childcare services generates the most interest from universities. This is a welcome development. However, there should be no suggestion that an institutional policy regarding the balancing of work and family life is primarily a service for women. This would confirm and reinforce traditional gender stereotypes and the allocation of roles by assigning women the primary responsibility for family, care and support. Structural changes pertaining to equal opportunity must be formulated as targets pertaining to all genders and society as a whole and explicitly illustrated as such.

Gender stereotypes are a particular disadvantage for women when behaviour that is regarded as 'typically female' is contrasted with successful management behaviour bearing masculine connotations. Overcoming gender stereotypes is one of the most difficult changes to be made because they are all-encompassing in our society and often not reflected upon. Universities and academia are no exceptions in this regard. There is a general need for awareness, complemented by targeted training and consultation in case of doubt, for the unquestioned impact of unconscious, stereotypical biases (unconscious bias), predominantly in critical situations such as recruitment decisions and nomination processes.

Gender stereotypes can most likely be overcome if the generalisation of 'typically' male or female behaviour associated with them is abandoned and an awareness of the great variance in behaviour among members of the same gender groups is raised within universities and among the general public. Variety and diversity need to be accepted and valued between as well as within groups.

In terms of the group of female researchers, an important task of science communication is systematically countering common stereotypes by

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<sup>6</sup> Another inter-university example is 'Mentoring Hessen – Frauen in Wissenschaft und Wirtschaft' (Mentoring Hessen – Women in academia and business), <https://www.mentoringhessen.de/> (available only in German, accessed 15/10/2019)

demonstratively presenting the diversity of academic achievements, activities and personalities of women. It is about creating positive visibility for women – and their diversity. Targeted science communication must ensure that women who have got past the glass ceiling do not run the risk of their position becoming a glass cliff:<sup>7</sup> if they take on a higher management position in critical phases and are thus more exposed to the risk of failure, they alone will be blamed for any failure. Female researchers in particularly visible positions are judged by different standards than their male colleagues in committees and in press coverage.<sup>8</sup> A survey within the Max Planck Society revealed similar results: at 26.3 %, people at the management level of academia, i.e. directors and group managers, most frequently reported having been treated differently because of their gender.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.3. Appointing women to influential body positions

The principle of equal representation of men and women on committees is only rarely realised, not least because the basic quotas are still low. On account of their smaller number, women in academia also face challenges due to multiple committee appointments. Within the scope of qualitative reporting on the research-oriented standards of gender equality, the DFG has pointed out the higher demands placed on women by committee work and identified compensation options as a key issue related to gender equality.

Compensation could help improve the representation of women: the restriction of an excessive committee system, critical review of the usefulness of quotas on a case-by-case basis and compulsory training of committees in unconscious biases<sup>10</sup> are other ways to restrict the demands placed on women for committee work.

Nevertheless, as it is generally foreseeable that the increased demands placed on women will not change rapidly given the low basic quotas, university heads and academic institutions should make sure that women take on more influential positions on committees. This means that women are given higher management positions and they do not, as is often the case, take on second-tier roles that generally involve no less

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<sup>7</sup> Ryan & Haslam, The Glass Cliff: Exploring the Dynamics Surrounding the Appointment of Women to Precarious Leadership Positions, 2005

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.republik.ch/2019/03/22/mit-einem-maennlichen-professor-waere-man-anders-umgesprungen> (regarding the Corolla case at ETH Zurich; available only in German, accessed on 23/09/2019)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.forschung-und-lehre.de/management/probleme-mit-mobbing-und-diskriminierung-in-der-mpg-1901/> (available only in German, accessed on 23/09/2019)

<sup>10</sup> See online tutorial by the University of Heidelberg on gender bias in appointment procedures, [https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/gleichstellungsbeauftragte/career/onlinetutorial\\_genderbias.html](https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/gleichstellungsbeauftragte/career/onlinetutorial_genderbias.html) (accessed 15/10/2019)

work but significantly less influence. University heads must implement selection processes that ensure that female members of universities are appropriately approached and considered.

### **3.4. More support for appointing women to higher management positions**

Appointing more women to influential positions in the research system will primarily require a stronger will. Gender equality is almost unanimously accepted and supported as a general objective, yet it is inadequately implemented. There need to be clearer and more visible signals from government, business and academia that more women are wanted in leading positions. The decision-making structures for nomination in the appointment procedures for influential positions in academia are also often non-transparent or confidential. This often leads to the nomination of men, who are recruited from existing networks, receiving privileged treatment.

### **3.5. Tapping into experiences and networks of elder stateswomen**

Women who have held higher management roles in academia and generally have a broad and influential network could make up an important part of the support system. They are particularly suited to advising university heads once their professional career is over, e.g. in conflicts and to put forward recommendations for recruiting suitable female researchers for management positions. Acquiring elder stateswomen, for example for an independent advisory board, would provide university heads and university councils with an extensive wealth of experience, including in gender equality issues.