



Arguments for a binding rule of gender balance in ERC panels and other instruments of EU research policy

Research and science in Europe need excellent women. Instruments created by the European Union should therefore ensure and enforce both gender balance and excellence. In order to help argue the case for gender balance and an unbiased notion of excellence, we present a set of questions and argued responses to them on the question of how to match inclusiveness and excellence: arguments for gender balance in ERC panels, gender balance among applicants, reasons for gender awareness training, as well as arguments for an inclusive, gender sensitive notion of excellence.

Gender balance is an obligation according to the Treaty of the European Union. Requiring gender balance does not place any restrictions on the actual selection strategy – other than the need to ensure a balance of female and male representatives. Gender balance does not limit the choice of who selected individuals are, what their specialisation is, which qualifications are required or how they are to apply. At the same time, achieving gender balance is an important tool to encourage female researchers to pursue a career in science. In the following paragraphs, we will point out which arguments should be considered and which measures could be taken when aiming to promote excellence while taking gender balance into account.

Why ask for gender balance in ERC panels?

Committees lacking gender balance may draft measures which might seem gender neutral but are actually discriminatory. The ERC might therefore unintentionally build the same barriers for women as found in other research programmes and thus reinforce problems that have already been identified in the EU research landscape. For instance, supporting “young researchers” as researchers of a certain age is meant to be gender neutral but can have a discriminating impact. Many women scientists (but also male researchers), for instance, who take a career break after their PhD to take over family caring responsibilities would be excluded from application, since when they return to professional life, they are junior researchers considering their stage of research, but more than 10 years may have passed since obtaining their PhD. A gender-balanced committee or panel is more likely to include individuals who are conscious of such a potential problem.

- *EPWS recommends that the ERC follows the European Commission's target to include in all panels a minimum of 40% women or men. For this purpose, also self-nomination/registration for the peer review panels and the register of referees should be possible if gender balance is not possible on the basis of the current shortlist. Anyone holding a PhD should be allowed to participate if he/she can prove expertise. Thus the pool of reviewers to choose from will become bigger and will hold more women – thereby allowing for quotas in the panels to be reached.*

Why provide gender awareness training?

Senior scientists perform, among their various functions, also the function of gate keeping. In key positions in a university or in the scientific community, senior scientists can function as inclusion and facilitation on the one hand, and, exclusion and control on the other. The peer review panel members are “gate keepers”. If one takes into consideration firstly, that gate keepers even in countries with a high degree of women scientists such as Finland are predominantly male, and that even if unconsciously, a gender bias takes place in reviewing systems, it can be assumed that gate keepers also play a role in making it easier for men to enter the profession while making it more difficult for women to get past the gate keepers. They may do so in the deepest belief to promote the most excellent researchers, but due to the criteria employed for excellence, they estimate male researchers as performing best.

- *EPWS recommends to provide gender awareness training for ERC peer review panels so as to make panel members – female as well as male – aware of the potential hidden disadvantages the scientific profession poses for women scientists.*
- *Gender experts / gender expertise are/ is to be included in the panels and in the support personnel of the programmes. Decisions should become accountable.*
- *EPWS offers its support wherever wanted considering such gender awareness training and any difficulties or questions arising in this context. Gender experts are available all over Europe, competent and willing to give their support through training days, briefings, the provision of check lists or any other assistance to panel members needed.*

Why ask for gender balance in the proposal stage – and how encourage women to apply?

Gender balance in research can only be reached in the long term if women are as strongly supported in their research career as men are. The ERC is a good instrument to ensure that this is happening. However, studies demonstrate that women apply lower numbers compared to their male peers.¹ This may be the result of self-selection – due to potentially biased indicators of excellence which make it harder for women scientists to correspond to the scientific community’s expectations (see below) in their own perception, and/or due to the lack of institutional support.

- *Careful consideration of balanced participation and encouragement for participation of women scientists is to be taken at all stages. Chairs and evaluators – female as well as male – have to be trained in horizontal issues such as gender awareness.*
- *The ERC needs to actively ensure a sufficient application rate of women by taking into account differences in the development of individual researchers’ careers and the innovative character of their research.*

¹ “Science Policies in the European Union. Promoting Excellence through Mainstreaming Gender Equality” (ETAN-report, 2000)

The connection between gender balance, excellence and innovation

It is in the interest of the European Union to include all intelligent minds in the research and innovation process. Doing so would avoid the waste of talent of various groups including women who make up a highly qualified more than 50% of EU students but on average only get to 15% of senior academic positions (with this percentage much lower in some countries and in some disciplines). Furthermore, as in industry, also in science and research, diversity might be linked to innovation.

Certain criteria used in the current system of evaluating excellence may also affect innovation. In many disciplines, for instance, articles in top-ranked international peer-reviewed journals may only be published after a two-year waiting period and may thus be outdated by the time they are publicly accessible. Usually, topics high on the research agenda may be more easily placed – yet niche topics may be at least as innovative. Still instruments such as non-scientific publications fostering science communication to society or articles in a language other than English, marginal topics and interdisciplinary research, are less likely to be considered stepping stones of a researcher's career as recently manifested by a study.²

Yet, mixed teams (research teams, panels, evaluation committees etc.) on all stages very likely will outperform homogeneous teams. To achieve this end, an inclusive and gender sensitive notion of 'excellence' is a precondition to encourage and allow for as many different types of researchers as possible to participate and be heard in the process. Doing so will enlarge the pool of high quality researchers and minimize potential biases in measuring their excellence.

How to revise current criteria of excellence – a set of examples

Excellence cannot be measured directly and unambiguously. Excellence is a result of the context in which it is evaluated, of judgments by individuals, gate keepers, with varying transparency and accountability, and has to be understood accordingly. As a result, not always the best ideas or the best researchers will succeed in open competition. Finding fair, objective and stimulating measures for excellence which minimize potential biases on all stages of the social process in which scientific excellence is established and at the same time foster innovation is in the interest of all researchers, research organisations, universities and industries as well as of society as a whole, because they are the only way to create, identify and maintain excellence throughout Europe. Gender Action Plans can help change evaluation practices and their consequences in science and research.³

In establishing excellence through an inclusive, gender sensitive social process, panels and evaluators could for example

- *look at relative instead of absolute achievements of individuals and/or of departments*

² "Survey of Factors affecting science communication by scientists and engineers" (The Royal Society, 2006) <http://www.royalsoc.ac.uk/downloaddoc.asp?id=307>

³ Clear recommendations already exist in the Commission Staff Working Document, Women and Science; Excellence and Innovation – gender equality in science" (2005), the "Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers" (Commission Recommendation of 11 March 2005 on the European Charter for Researchers and on a Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers) and the Report on "Gender and Excellence" (European Commission, Directorate General Research, 2004: Gender and Excellence in the Making).

- Applying the criterion to peer-reviewed publications, this could mean, for instance that 30-year old researcher with family responsibilities would get the chance to measure up with the possibly longer international peer-reviewed publications list of a 50-year old professor without caring responsibilities.
- *establish selection criteria that give a chance to varied careers and innovative research topics/methods*
 - A researcher with an unorthodox research career may be at least as likely to produce innovative ideas although being less likely to be able to comply with the criteria of international peer-review.
- *take note of additional factors such as*
 - being able to guide a research group by creating a rewarding work environment
 - encourage young researchers to develop their own scientific thinking
 - practice in interdisciplinary contexts
 - have a sense of social responsibility concerning the scientific work and its outcomes
 - be able and available to communicate to research and research results to society.
- *understand a diverse composition of research groups as well as gender awareness a precondition to excellence.*
 - Excellence has to be understood in the context in which it is evaluated and panels have to be aware of the hidden biases encountering women scientists in the scientific profession.
 - In measuring excellence, the social process of establishing 'excellence' has to be taken into account striving to minimize potential biases at all stages of the decision making process.
 - The evaluation of criteria of excellence shall be undertaken by a forum consisting of an equal number of female researchers, young researchers, established researchers, researchers outside traditional research institutions and representatives of innovative research in industry.

The European Platform of Women Scientists EPWS is a non profit association with an international aim. The Platform seeks to promote women scientists by networking their networks and engage women scientists in the research policy debate. The overall objective of the Platform is to act as a structural link between women scientists and policy makers.

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