

2018: Summary report – Gender Bias project 2018

Name of project / applicant: Gender and Networks in Early-Career Academic Advancement/Danish Centre for Studies in Research and Research Policy
1. Please describe the main activities
<p>This research project consists of the following elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A review of the literature on gender, professional networks and networking and development of a theoretical framework (first paper)• Two initial explorative focus group interviews with young scholars at AU• 20 in-depth interviews with early career scholars at AU• Analysis and dissemination of results
2. Are the activities in accordance with the project description that was granted? If no: What has been changed?
<p>No. The initial plan was to conduct a university-wide survey to map the academic networks of early-career scholars at AU, and based on the survey further explore the mechanisms of networks through a series of focus group interviews. Due to unforeseen complications with collecting the survey data, we decided to conduct 20 in-depth single-person interviews instead. The decision to conduct single-person interviews instead of focus groups was based on the experience with the two explorative focus groups, which made it clear to us that speaking about social and professional relations as well as gender issues can be a really sensitive topic and difficult to address in a group setting.</p>
3. Please describe the main results
<p>Overall, the preliminary analysis of the data material shows that early career scholars at AU believe academic networks are very important for academic advancement. Two reasons for the importance of networks are stated: 1) networks are important for the quality of research, as they facilitate collaboration (sharing knowledge, skills, expertise and equipment). 2) Networks are important for academic career advancement, because formal and informal connections provide early career scholars with information, strategic advice and support.</p> <p>However, our data indicate that many early-career researchers feel uncomfortable with networking practices, such as approaching influential people, small talk, ‘boasting’ about ones work and achievements, (which are widely viewed as belonging mainly to the corporate world, i.e. as inappropriate behaviour in the academic setting).</p> <p>Moreover, the analysis indicate that most of the respondents knew their current/former PhD advisor from their years as students (had worked for them as TAs, student assistants etc.), and were actively encouraged by their advisor to apply for a PhD scholarship. The typical type and size of networks vary across academic disciplines, but what characterizes the networks in general is that many of the respondents are immediately/directly/automatically “embedded into networks” when they start their academic career –helped by their advisors.</p> <p>Finally, the analysis shows that being a woman is perceived as a barrier for career progress in academia by both male and female respondents. Some of the reasons the respondents mention for this is the demand for international mobility and job insecurity. However, some respondents also mention networks and networking practices; for example how male professors tend to have and promote young male protégés in their networks (please see appendix I), and how it can be difficult for female</p>

<p>researchers of different cultural backgrounds to participate in social events, which is perceived as important.</p>
<p>4. Have the project results been disseminated (research publications, lectures, conference abstracts etc.)? If yes: Please explain. If no: Do you plan to disseminate the results?</p>
<p>The first article (a literature review) is currently in R&R status at Kvinder Køn og Forskning. We plan to write two empirical papers aimed at international peer reviewed journals We plan to present our results at a GIR meeting at Aarhus University We plan to write an opinion piece or give an interview to for example Omnibus or Magisterbladet</p>
<p>5. Has the project revealed barriers and/or solutions for achieving a more balanced gender representation in research?</p>
<p>What appears most important for the successful career progression of our interview participants is their integration into influential networks, either already prior to commencing the PhD or when commencing the PhD. Key to access to such networks is the role of the supervisor.</p> <p>In this regard, we draw on the work of Dr Jennifer de Vries (see appendix II), who distinguish between two roles which the supervisor may take – the mentor and the sponsor. While mentoring involves mainly advising, sponsorship involves actively putting the mentee forward for opportunities and influential network contacts. In other words, sponsorship may make or break an academic career.</p> <p>While most supervisors already engage in sponsoring activities, they typically occur on a discretionary basis, which leaves such practices open to subjective, biased judgment as to whom are deserving of sponsorship.</p> <p>Example: Many of the interview participants knew their PhD/postdoc advisors as students, either as teachers or as master-thesis advisors. Through this relationship, they were typically encouraged by the supervisor to apply for e.g. a student instructor, research assistant or PhD position. The encouragement (sponsorship) of the advisor is, in other words, decisive for whom among students enter into research careers. This type of path into the academic career ensures the young scholar's adequate integration into the research environment. If, on the other hand, the young scholar enters a PhD independently (their application was unsolicited), this person may be at a disadvantage.</p> <p>The same applies to subsequent career steps. Without the active sponsorship of a senior (who writes a postdoc for them into their next funding application, forwards important information about vacancies, or recommends them to network contacts), young scholars may face additional challenges to successfully progressing in academia.</p> <p>In our research, international early-career researchers as well as some women face particular barriers in this regard, which leaves them particularly vulnerable to scientific and social isolation and hence more likely to opt-out of the academic career track.</p> <p>Furthermore, the interview participants also describe very different supervision experiences. Advisors' involvement in the young scholars' projects, well-being and future careers vary significantly.</p>
<p>6. How can the results serve as inspiration for the next university-wide action plan for a more balanced gender representation in research at Aarhus University?</p>
<p>While networking-skills workshops or similar may be helpful to individual early-career scholars, they cannot stand alone. An early-career researcher may 'network', i.e. initiate contact with prominent</p>

seniors, however, in order for that junior to benefit, the senior must reciprocate and grant access to her/his network. To achieve this goal, a “broker”, i.e. someone to vouch for the junior and make an introduction, is a major advantage.

Therefore, the theoretical distinction between mentoring and sponsoring activities is key to understanding that much subjective pre-selection occurs before the actual hiring of researchers takes place. Therefore, minimizing unconscious bias in selection and recruitment processes alone will not be able to improve diversity at Aarhus University (for more on this topic see appendix III).

As a result, supervision responsibilities and tasks have to be very clearly defined to include sponsoring practices as mandatory and as a set KPIs against which the supervisor is benchmarked (see e.g. de Vries 2018 p. 22).

Secondly, local leadership (research groups, departments etc.) should raise awareness of possible bias in pre-selection, and challenge senior academics on their presumed objective assessments of juniors. It is not sufficient to ensure that those juniors already pre-selected and sponsored by seniors are qualified, since the pre-selection may have excluded certain groups of juniors (introverted students, internationals, ethnic minorities, women, etc.).

7. How do you evaluate this type of small-scale project as a tool to generate knowledge and provide inputs to a new action plan in the field of gender bias?

We see this type of GE initiative as a highly innovative and ambitious way of obtaining in-depth, institutionally grounded knowledge on the structural and cultural barriers facing women and minority researchers at Aarhus University. Our project has successfully generated new knowledge on how formal and informal networking practices may contribute to perpetuate inequalities among early-career researchers. However, given the project’s short time frame and limited resources, we will not be able to provide a more detailed account of the results at this point in time. Note also that the unforeseen complications facing the project in July and August 2018 (due to force majeure conditions) has resulted in a situation, where a vast amount work hours was invested in a survey questionnaire that was never launched. This has obviously limited the available resources for the subsequent qualitative analysis. We will keep the *Committee on research and external relations* updated on future publications resulting from this project.

8. Any other remarks