

Equal opportunities in research funding – Gender equality standards at the FWF

The Austrian government has set itself the goal of ensuring that Austria attains a top international position in the field of research, technology and innovation (RTI) and has therefore been developing a new RTI strategy since 2009. As also noted in the FWF's work programme, human resources are one of the crucial requirements for meeting this objective.

There are three ways to bolster this important forward-looking strategy, which also represents a bottleneck in terms of resources. Supporting junior researchers, attracting researchers from abroad, and increasing the share of women among Austria's researchers each represent viable ways of creating this extremely important foundation for any research structure.

At the same time, this strategy should also include efforts to ensure equal opportunities for men and women in research, meaning that women should be represented proportionately in all sectors and at all levels of RTI. It also means that in the coming years, the share of women will have to increase significantly in all areas where they are currently underrepresented.

The potential for such an increase certainly exists, as women have accounted for over half of all students at universities since the early 1990s and the majority of university graduates since 1999. At higher levels, however, the share of women is far lower (one third of all university assistants and less than 15 per cent of professorships).

In order to effect the necessary changes, it is necessary to employ instruments such as gender mainstreaming and the continued provision of overproportional support for women in research. Gender mainstreaming (GM) serves as a general long-term strategy for attaining gender equality in all policy areas, as the goal of these efforts is to change the general conditions and structures which bring about inequality. As a guiding principle for RTI policy activities, GM means stimulating research on gender issues and balancing the representation of men and women in all areas. In its "Strategy 2020" document, the Austrian Council for Research and Technology Development (RFT) also recommends new career models for women.

Women as FWF grant recipients

The FWF advocates these objectives and has observed a steady increase in the share of funding applications from women over the last 10 years. In 1998, 12.9% of stand-alone project applications were submitted by women; by 2009, this percentage had risen to 25.7%. In order to maintain and reinforce this development and to raise awareness in general, the FWF revised its corporate policy principles in 2008 to include gender equality in research as well as equal opportunities for all applicants and the equal treatment of all scholarly disciplines.

The implementation of gender equality is regarded as a key task. The FWF is aware that this is a broad-based objective which is to be implemented by means of gender mainstreaming at the level of the FWF office as well as the FWF's funding programmes. Employee training initiatives and programme design activities have been expanded to include this dimension in recent years. One example is the revision of the FWF's application requirements for grants and fellowships, as age limits have been eliminated, parental leave is now recognised in the calculation of a researcher's "academic age," and accompanying measures have been taken to make women more visible in science and research.

The gender-based analysis of relevant data from the fields of research policy and research funding in the FWF's annual report as well as the internal and external presentation of transparent processes in the FWF's funding decisions also complement and support this objective. At the FWF, a wide variety of internal and external processes are guided by the gender equality standards discussed below; these standards have been developed and articulated on the basis of the FWF's practical experience, and the FWF has committed itself to them voluntarily.

External processes: Gender equality standards in research funding

Decision processes and structures in the FWF's decision-making bodies

The FWF's procedures are conceived in a way that ensures fair – and above all equal – treatment of female and male applicants. These processes are designed to ensure that funding decisions are made without any form of bias whatsoever. Checks and balances at various levels of the process – from the receipt of the application to the funding decision – serve to ensure the objective assessment of every application received. In the FWF's decision-making bodies (FWF Board, FWF Executive Board), the organisation makes every effort to ensure that the gender distribution of grant recipients is in line with that of the applications received. In cases where the FWF receives applications of the same quality, the underrepresented gender is given preference.

General support for junior researchers / women in research

For years now, supporting junior researchers has been one of the FWF's core agendas. In the eyes of the FWF, the fact that women are underrepresented in Austria's science and research system justifies the allocation of special grants for female junior researchers in the Career Development Programme for Women in Research, which has been in place since 2006. At the same time, the FWF has worked actively to change the general conditions in all of its programmes, which includes supporting measures wherever possible. The development of programme objectives and the ultimate design of FWF programmes are in line with this goal.

Programme design

In its consistent efforts to support junior researchers and ensure equal opportunities, the FWF strives to achieve gender balance in all of its programmes. Programmes are redesigned on the basis of needs analyses and adapted on the basis of evaluation results. Cyclical evaluations serve to verify the actual effect of programmes in accordance with their relevant objectives. New and existing programmes are analysed accordingly and reviewed for their potential effects on gender equality.

Review procedure

The review procedure is a key process at the FWF with regard to ensuring that women and men are given equal access to all funding resources. The FWF makes its decisions on the basis of a quality-oriented international peer review process. This goal is supported by measures taken to sensitise the FWF's employees and decision-making bodies as well as its international peer reviewers to the organisation's objectives with regard to gender equality. Where significant differences are observed in the approval rates for men and women, the appropriate analyses are carried out.

Decision-making process

The FWF evaluates each applicant's scientific track record in accordance with the relevant programme category and the accompanying programme objectives.

In its decision-making sessions, the FWF Board discusses the relationship between each applicant's academic age, career attainment and scientific achievements to date.

Internal processes: Gender equality standards in the FWF's HR policies

Recruiting

The FWF recruits employees on the basis of their expertise and experience. In this process, age, gender and ethnic background must not influence the selection of employees.

Remuneration

The elimination of the seniority-based salary scale and the introduction of a performance- and function-based compensation system have required the FWF to address the issue of discrimination in employee remuneration.

Continuing education and training

The FWF considers it important for all employees to take advantage of training and continuing education opportunities. The courses offered are open to all employees and are tailored to their individual requests and needs.

Work-life balance

The FWF also considers it important to ensure that employees can reconcile their work at the FWF with their own personal goals. Flexible working hours and tailored working solutions help the FWF to attain this objective.

Workplace and task design

The FWF makes every effort to create general conditions which are especially conducive to enhancing its employees' willingness and ability to perform their duties. Internal project groups and teams are assembled on the basis of the employees' expertise in the relevant areas.

Organisational culture

The FWF also regards gender equality as a key management task and makes efforts to ensure gender balance in the delegation of management responsibilities according to each employee's expertise. The gender-sensitive use of language has also been implemented both internally and externally.