

Unconscious bias 'widens gender gap' in research

Evaluators' unawareness of their own bias is contributing to gender inequality in research and innovation, a report published by the European Commission has said.

The report, published on 28 September, found that subconscious expectations of science and engineering as masculine roles can lead to unfair assessments of women's CVs, proposals and interviews in grant applications and career assessments.

Evanthia Schmidt, a gender and policy researcher at Aarhus University in Denmark and member of a Commission advisory group on gender in Horizon 2020, said that implicit biases were an understudied problem. "In some countries, such as Ireland, UK, Sweden and the Netherlands, very concrete actions are used to address implicit gender bias in funding organisations and universities. But these are exceptions," she said.

The report warned that little had been done at a European level to tackle the problem. Katrien Maes, chief policy officer at the League of European Research Universities, said implicit bias was an important part of why Europe still doesn't have balanced gender representation in universities, particularly at senior levels.

University leaders "need to own this issue", she said.

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"Universities need to have plans and they need to be implemented, monitored and sustained if we're going to make progress."

The European Research Council provides bias training to its evaluators, and is one of the few European funders that publish gender-specific data on grant applicants' success rates. In the first three years of Horizon 2020, women were successful 12 per cent of the time across all ERC calls, compared with 13 per cent for men.

But Isabelle Vernos, an ERC Scientific Council member and chairwoman of its gender-balance working group, said the actions the ERC had taken so far were "not an easy fix". The ERC would continue to be vigilant and transparent about equality, she said.

Gloria Origgi, a cognitive scientist at the CNRS, France's national research centre, is another member of the Commission advisory group. She said the Commission was working on a toolkit to make evaluators reflect on their bias without becoming over-conscious of it. "We need to use the tools in a reasonable way," she said. "We shouldn't be too rigid about telling people how to think."

Work kicks off on next long-term EU budget

Discussions are intensifying around the EU's next multi-year budget, which will have to incorporate the loss of the UK's roughly €10 billion annual financial contribution.

Budget commissioner Günther Oettinger has proposed to include both cuts and new funding sources to deal with the Brexit shortfall. On 29 September he embarked on a six-month tour to gather ministers' views on the next Multiannual Financial Framework, due to start in 2021.

Germany is the biggest contributor to the EU budget and is a strong supporter of research and innovation, with a target of spending 3.5 per cent of its GDP on R&D. France is the second biggest. Robert Madelin, a former senior Commission official and now a visiting fellow at the Oxford Centre for Technology and Global Affairs, pointed out that president Emmanuel Macron has been a vocal backer of innovation. It would be "really illogical" to cut research and innovation funding in the next MFF under these circumstances, Madelin said.

However, Dan Andrée, a special adviser at the Swedish innovation agency Vinnova, flagged that the Swedish government has said that the next MFF must be smaller than the current one. This probably won't have a

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significant impact on the Framework programme, he suggested, but the Swedish government does want to cut structural funds, which also support R&D.

Structural funds, research and agriculture are the only budget lines where significant cuts could be made, said Fabian Zuleeg, chief executive of the European Policy Centre, a Brussels-based think tank. He said he expected research to fare best, but that in any case the next MFF should focus less on a spending target for research and innovation, and more on making better use of funds, particularly to support public-private collaboration.

The European Parliament's budgetary control committee published a draft opinion on the next MFF on 28 September. It said that structural funds should be refocused, but that research and innovation funding needed to be protected.

"I think we should aim at maintaining similar levels of R&D and innovation funding," said the draft's rapporteur Petri Sarvamaa, a Finnish MEP. "Putting money in R&D is the best and most efficient way to use European resources."